The Rose of Santa Fé

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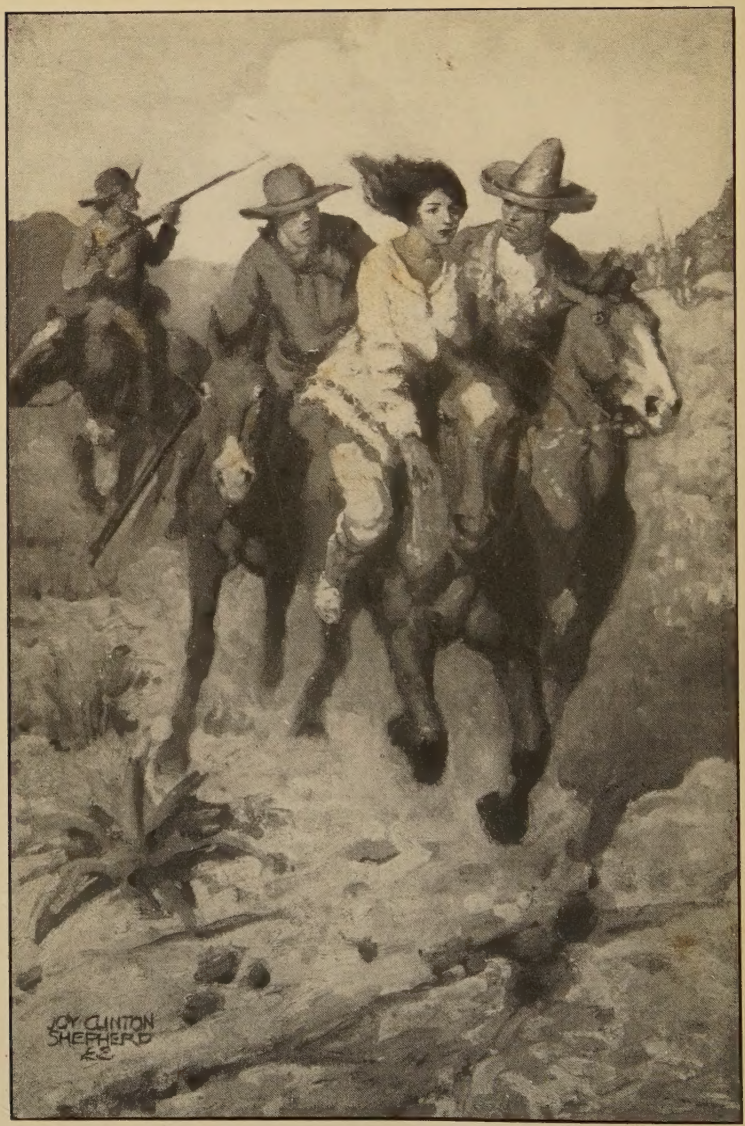

THE LONG AMERICAN WHEELED ABOUT

The Rose of Santa Fé

By

EDWIN L. SABIN

Author of "Desert Dust"

THE
RYERSON
PRESS

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To My
Señorita That Was
and
Señora Más Querida
That Is

CONTENTS

I.	I Am Tendered Alms	11
II.	I Meet the Long American	14
III.	I Shoot a Match	25
IV.	I Ride on Guard	42
V.	I Chase the Buffalo	61
VI.	I Win My Spurs	79
VII.	I Am Dismissed from Service	96
VIII.	I Dance at the Baile	116
IX.	I Am Bilked Again	139
X.	We Take the Treasure Trail	149
XI.	We Seek the Little Door	158
XII.	We Arrive at Goal	168
XIII.	We Find and Lose	179
XIV.	We Face Disaster	188
XV.	For the Sake of the Señorita	199
XVI.	The Long American Achieves	215
XVII.	We Make Plans	227
XVIII.	We Wait the Cut-Nose	236
XIX.	We Ply for Sanctuary	249
XX.	We Raise the Dead	261
XXI.	We Grapple Fortune	274
XXII.	We Are Thrown Aback	284
XXIII.	O Señorita Rosa!	297

The Rose of Santa Fé

CHAPTER I

I AM TENDERED ALMS

A SMART tap upon my listless folded hands aroused me where I sat huddled in the sunshine against a stack of baled goods—buffalo hides, Mexican blankets, sheep pelts, and so on—dully watching the hoof-churned road 'twixt the town and the ramshackle wharf at the yellow, snaggy Missouri three miles northeastward. Short-focusing with sick eyes I saw a silver coin tumbled into my lap.

A curt word had accompanied, unintelligible. By painful effort I again changed perspective, just in time to witness a gaily costumed horseman canter away. A Spaniard, he, by hat, jacket, slashed pantaloons, and seat in the saddle. Groping amidst my addled brains to differentiate the real and the unreal, as in a dream I beheld him doff his hat beside the curtains of a carriage—a high-wheeled American Dearborn, attached to a spike team of one span of mules and a single animal before with rainbow-cloaked, peak-crowned servant astride it.

This bewildered me. The caballero, pausing there, evidently addressed the carriage occupants; the car-

riage and team (an amazing sight, especially as the vehicle bore, behind, the luggage of a cumbersome ancient ox-hide trunk elaborately tied fast) moved on, with the escort rider pacing even, at a fore wheel; and to my stare agape there responded the merest glimpse of a shawl-framed face, by that token a woman's face, peeping briefly back at me from between the nearer side-curtains.

The glance—I could not say why, but it impressed me as youth indulging pity for youth, and I felt that the woman was no matron.

The equipage turned half-right from the road and forced its way onward into the hurly-burly of wagons, animals, teamsters, horsemen, what-not, pressing for the farther outskirts of the village and the prairie frontier beyond. I wrestled with the phenomenon of spike team, vehicle American, Spanish attendants and probably Spanish occupants, all significant of wealth and likely of culture and appearing as a phantasm of romance here in this vortex, Independence town in extreme western Missouri, where the river trail and the two great land trails to the mountains and to New Mexico centered. Then the coin stung me into consciousness of self.

Its edge rested against my hand, and blistered the skin. For it had been tossed as to a beggar; and had I come to that degradation—did I, I, a young man of gentle birth, of sterling family, of education and of proper pride in station, now resemble a mendicant invoking, by his very mien and posture, alms of the casual stranger?

There was a rush of blood to my head, so that the world swam eddying; and in rage and shame which fairly nauseated I flicked the coin away with all my strength.

The revulsion swept me off cold, hot, and trembling; time and people passed me by, I sensed only that I hated Independence, hated the churlish Far West, hated the caballero coin-tosser (he in the jaunty costume, upon the spirited horse), perchance hated the less obvious occupants of the carriage. Thus I sat, not a wholesome object, immersed in rancor at everything and everybody and blinded to all except my wracking agonies of mind and matter.

But I was again aroused.

CHAPTER II

I MEET THE LONG AMERICAN

"Qué hay, compañero?"

These words heartily spoken in that Spanish tongue with which I was none too familiar had been uttered by the strangest-looking man that I had yet seen—although, as might be inferred, this depot at the States end of the Santa Fé and the Oregon Trails was panoramic with bizarre life.

He stood leaning upon an immensely long rifle, and as from a great height gazing upon miserable me. And he was indeed a tall man: a lean, tall man with grotesque turkey neck rising wrinkled and scrawny above shoulders that seemed unusually broad. His small, puckered but shrewd face was shadowed by his wide-brimmed wool hat; a greasy fringed buckskin hunting-shirt, open at the hairy chest, fell to the knees of his leathern leggins and these flared over his blue-and-white-beaded moccasins.

As for the rest of his accoutrement, he wore the customary bullet pouch and powder flask of the mountain-man, suspended on right and left; a sheathed knife at his belt, and the inevitable little sack containing, no doubt, flint, steel, tobacco and other "possibles."

Swart and unshaven though he was, and a type for-

eign to me save through haphazard contact, something in his greeting, "What's the matter, partner?" and the twinkle of his bright blue eye suffused me with a sudden glow of gratitude.

"You act down on your luck, friend."

A gulp of acrid protest almost choked me. At his feet I was like a starved, storm-beaten fyst cowered in a doorway, and rough as he appeared, his words were the first acceptable compassion that I had been tendered in several days. Independence was no place for a helpless weakling. Its one main street, in wet weather a bog, in dry a dust-cloud, was thronged with uncompromising disorder intent after self-interests: with the outgoing and incoming Santa Fé caravan trade—the huge freight wagons hauled by plunging mules or by broad-horn oxen, many scarcely broken, their wool-hatted teamsters cursing, and plying whips; with the trappers, voyageurs, fur-hunters, in their buckskins and blanket-coats, from the Oregon Country, the Upper Missouri, and the Southwest; with the rivermen boiling in from the steamboats and flatboats bound to or from St. Louis; with dark-visaged, furtive Mexicans in their varied serapes; with Indians—Osage, Oto, Sioux, Kickapoo, Missouri, Kansas—standing silent like statues, seeing everything and saying little, or stalking hither and thither, bent upon barter; all leavened by the few less spectacular merchants, caravan owners and trader's clerks, and a sprinkling of eager Eastern tourists—white-faced young men like myself (or like I had been), outfitted for the prairies to seek health and adventure.

"By thunder, you're as low in the belly as a drowned-out prairie-dog," laughed the long-necked man. "There's a tongue in your head, lad? Use it. 'Rapaho, Sioux, Spanish, a spatter of parley-voo, or good American—they're all the same to me. Sick, are you?"

I broke the spell of wretched lassitude.

"Yes, sir. I've had the fever. It's left me, but ——"

"The shakes too, I reckon."

Chills? Horribly! And there is no chill more deadly than that from being a stranger and ill and penniless in a new country.

"Yes, sir. They've left me, also, I think. So," I added, with surge of chagrin, "has everything else. But that can be of no great moment to you, sir. I'm not asking—I—I ——" And thereupon, to my burning shame I lapsed flatly into tears and needs must bury my face in my two ridiculously thin hands.

Down he plumped, that long-necked Western giant, his arm clapped about my shoulders, and he buoyed me firmly while I choked and shuddered.

"Pshaw, pshaw!" said he. "Chills and fever is enough to lay any man out. I'd rather be tied to the stake for the Comanche squaws, myself. But you've suffered with worse than plain chills and fever, I'll wager. Tell me about it, son. What are you doing here? Where's your party? I'm a master hand at reading signs, and chances are I can help you on the trail."

That was too much. But he let me blubber until

I was done and in decent fashion might explain, for he was not the kind to be rebuffed nor deceived.

Explain I did: How I had foolishly come out from a law clerkship in Cincinnati, to make my venture upon the prairies with a caravan; how I had had a letter to Mr. Ceran St. Vrain, the extensive trader, care of Messrs. B. Pratte & Co., at St. Louis, recommending me to his disposal; how Messrs. Pratte had informed me that Mr. St. Vrain was about to set forth from Independence upon his last trip of the year, but that with haste I might catch him; how on my way up-river I had been stricken with fever, and I scarce had any recollection of being carried ashore here at Independence landing and stowed in some room over a grog shop; how, minus money, letters, weapons, everything except my single suit of garments I had been turned out to shift for myself, as soon as I had been milked dry; and how I had not the means of traveling west, north nor yet south—and lacked even the capabilities of enforcing my rights.

"Sho'!" he muttered. "Give me an Injun village rather than one of these 'civilized' white towns. Why, a sick Snake could enter a Blackfoot lodge and he'd be well treated before they killed him. But you're far from being gone coon yet," he added. "Sheer hunger is what ails you, and that's soon remedied. Are you still of mind to try the prairie life—or do you hanker for your home folks, under roof?"

"I had started to try the prairie," said I. "I had intention to cut loose and I hate to turn. But with Mr. St. Vrain gone, sir, I see little hope,

especially when I haven't a rifle, nor the strength to point it."

"Yep, St. Vrain's gone; been gone a fortnight, I hear tell, and he'll not be back till spring. He'll winter at Taos and Bents' Fort, I reckon, where he has interests. But listen, now: Have you handled a rifle? Have you ever had to depend on it, or on your native wits; or, better, on both together?"

"I've hunted along the Ohio," said I. "My father was a Daniel Boone man in Kentucky and I've used a rifle ever since I was a small boy. As for fighting Indians and the like—no, sir. I know only what my father told me, at his knee. I'm accustomed to the timber, not to the prairie. And if my treatment here is a sample of prairie manners I fear I shall never get accustomed to such life." Forthwith, in sudden gust of hot anger I swore roundly.

This pleased him. He clapped me upon the shoulder again.

"By the powers, you're still a man! You have the spark. Had St. Vrain been conned of you he might have done worse than waited. I've seen your same before—you've got the right eye and chin, and guts. Yes, I've seen many a greenhorn of your stamp take to the Injun Country and come back with his leggins fringed with hair. Can you ride?"

"When I'm able to sit a saddle," said I, speaking bravely.

"Once in the buffalo range where we can put a lining in your stomach, and you'll grip a horse," he assured. "There's nothing like buffalo meat as a steady

diet. Listen: I'm setting out with a caravan, myself, to-morrow morning. I know of a place open in it. Say yes or no. If you say 'yes' I'll stake you to your outfit, and gladly, for I have curiosity to see how you'll measure up. I rarely misjudge a man. If you say 'no,' then I'll lend you enough to get you back into the States, and you can repay me from your clerkship at pen and ink. So which is it: the saddle or the stool?"

A swift gush of confidence invigorated me like a swig of stout Monongahela.

"I choose the prairie," said I. "My father died in the open, and I would die there too, rather than live snugged between walls."

"Bueno!" he approved. "A year on the prairie is worth a hundred in town. Stand up; you're a man. When I've filled your belly and you've one of Sam Hawken's pets in your fist you'll think no more of dying out yonder. Persons don't go yonder with notion to die; they court life, and so 'tis."

I rose giddily; he stayed me for an instant until my weak head cleared, then he strode off, with me at his flat heels. His very ardor, the brimming virility of him, coupled to my own properly awakened spirit nerved me to hold the pace. We rounded to in a squalid little eating place, served by a yellow, dwarfish foreigner who wore a dirty apron and a Creole handkerchief cap.

My long-necked friend brought his hand heavily down upon the bare, stained table at which we sat—his rifle he had leaned against the board wall beside.

"Hi, Pedro! Vite! Pronto! Ven acá! Stir your stumps. Beaver tail an' buff'ler hump for two."

The dingy room contained a modicum of other guests, either at tables or at the short bar which closed the end: a brace of trappers in leather; a trio of voyageurs in head kerchiefs and capotes; a St. Louis merchant in broadcloth and a prospective customer in linsey-woolsey; a squad of Mexicans in blankets, and another Mexican—a slender youth, in silvered hat, velvet jacket similar to a dragoon's by cut, and lavishly trimmed with tinseled braid; hip-tight, yellow-slashed velvet pantaloons; and high heels enormously spurred. The butt of a clumsy pistola projected from the folds of his crimson sash.

He posed negligently against the bar, smoking a cigarette and apparently surveying to no purpose. But his dark eyes flashed in our direction, as we sat; and there twanged within me a chord of memory, persistent, resentful. My cheeks burned, the back of my hand stung afresh. He was—he certainly was ——

Mine Host Pedro came hastening.

"Your order, señores?"

"Beaver tail an' buff'ler hump for two wolfish men, I said."

The Spanish Creole in the dirty apron and knotted handkerchief grinned with discolored teeth and spread his palms.

"I have beef, pork, fish, señores; coffee, and very good rum."

My long-necked friend snorted.

"I tell you, we want something to tickle our

guts. Beef, then, and coffee, and don't forget the sugar."

"Maybe chile con carne, señor?"

"It's warming. A kettle of it and have it hot."

"Sí, señor. You will find it hot."

And so it was; hot from the stove and hot with the peppers. And the coffee was strong enough to float a nail. This being my first hopeful taste of such cooking I decided that I liked it—for there is that in these Spanish dishes which surely does tickle, as my long-necked friend would say, one's inwards. Urged by the taste, and by the aromas, I fell to ravenously. In truth stark hunger was what now chiefly ailed me.

The negligent young Spanish gentleman strolled across to us; with gleam of white teeth and easy lift of filigreed hat addressed us. Handsome as a picture he was.

"Buenos días, señores."

"Muy bueno, amigo mío," my friend responded. "Will you do us the favor of joining us?"

"Many thanks, but I have eaten." And he glanced with inquiring, even boldly staring black eyes at me. Yes, he was the coin-tosser. I hardened, and met his gaze in kind. Enmity may be as prompt as love, at first sight—particularly between men. And as man and man, this was first sight.

"Another friend of mine; your comrade on the journey," remarked the long-neck. "I have engaged him, as Don Isidro requested." A faintly amused smile (from wonderment not unnatural, I agree) penetrated the caballero's courtesy as he bowed and

murmured. My patron quickly set him aright. "Once he is supplied with the proper inside and outside, and rides gun in hand, I will answer for him as fully competent, amigo. Have no fears. He is only recovering from an illness."

"'Stá bueno," the caballero replied politely—but he had not rid his features of that smirk, which also now stung. "Horse and saddle will be waiting. He will come well armed?"

"With the best. From here we go to the Hawkens' shop. Shall we see you there?"

"Quién sabe—who knows?" And he shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe yes, maybe no, señor. But I will see you at the caravan. Until then, á Dios."

"Á Dios," said we.

Lighting a swiftly rolled cigarette of husk he strolled away, as graceful in movements as a panther.

"Your compagnon de voyage, young man," informed my friend. "Don Antonio García y Alarid is his handle. But tackle your victuals. You'll have plenty of him later. This business of the moment is more pressing."

The major portion of the large and savory dish having fallen to my disposal, and my long-necked patron having paid the reckoning (much to my vexation), we emerged into the sunshine.

"That's fetched the color into your cheeks already," he roundly congratulated. "I tell you, a few days in the buffalo country will make you feel half hoss and half alligator. Meat's the caper, whether raw, stewed, roasted or jerked. I've lived on straight meat for ten

and twelve months at a stretch. It gives you jaws and belly. Now we'll see what Sam Hawken has for us in the way of a meat getter."

"I must ask your name, sir," said I. "I cannot be under such obligations to you without having your name. May I have the honor of your name?"

"Few have," he retorted, with the twist of a smile. "I scarcely have it, myself. To the Injuns I'm Leather Neck, in their lingos. To the Santa Féans I'm El Americano Largo—the Long American. On the trap trail and 'mongst traders I'm Old Hoss and Old Jack, to the whites. Are you by chance a college man?"

"University of Ohio."

"I see. I went through William and Mary, myself—in by the front and out by the back, and took my diploma on the prairie. So say no more about obligations. We college men must help each other."

This accounted, then, for his certain gentlemanly language, interspersed with less elegant Far Western expressions.

"With your permission, sir," I proffered, "and lacking completer title, I shall call you Jack." But "Long American" struck me as more pat.

"At your pleasure," he uttered. "Jack, Old Jack, or Old Hoss—I answer to all. Y su gracia cuál es—what is your name, señor? You speak the Spanish?"

"Indifferently." And I told him my name, of which he made small account although it was a family name well known in the Ohio country.

"Dick will do," he observed. "'Tis a short handle and easily packed into my cranium. Now step with me and we'll have a word with Sam Hawken."

CHAPTER III

I SHOOT A MATCH

I WAS curious to see Gunsmith Sam Hawken. My own rifle—lost to me during my illness—had been a Golcher & Butler piece, from Philadelphia, and a favorite in our West; but the prairie and mountain pieces of the Brothers Hawken (commonly known as Hawkins) appeared to have gained a tremendous reputation. 'Twas said that they were an advancement upon the Kentucky rifle, being more heavily stocked and of larger bore to meet the requirements of hard service in stopping the fierce beasts and the fiercer wild men of the trans-Missouri country.

The Hawkens' gunshop had recently been removed from St. Louis to Independence upon the frontier. It was modest in guise and contained no great supply, for the making of a Hawken rifle was slow hand work. But as I tried the balance of one or two pieces chosen at random, while grizzled Mr. Sam Hawken and my new friend exchanged conversation, I conceded that a man would be quickly satisfied.

With a "Come here, compañero," the Long American becked me over.

"This is the lad," he introduced. "He'll take the standard drop, I fancy. As for me, I need something as crooked in the grip as a buffalo's hind leg, to suit my

own style of build. Say standard drop, about twelve pounds heft, with one of your knock-'em-stiff thirty-six inch barrels, Sam ——"

"No, sir." Mr. Sam Hawken (senior, I believe, to his brother Jake) had been scanning me with small, wrinkle-meshed gray eyes; the eyes of a marksman. "But I have the very gun, friend. We're getting away from your sixty-to-the pound bullets in a thirty-six or forty inch barrel—like that rifle which, you assert, jibes with your own inches. I have the very gun, and I'd like him to try it."

He stepped back into the rear of the shop and returned with a rifle.

"This gun I finished only yesterday. You see the bore; it carries a ball forty to the pound, in a thirty-two inch barrel. I've reduced the twist and sighted it a hair's-breadth high; and I'll guarantee that in right hands it will put bullet after bullet into the space of a dollar at one hundred paces. But you must draw very fine. Will you test it, sirs?"

"Have you tested it?" demanded my friend.

"Never a gun leaves the shop that hasn't been tested by my own self."

"Then you've said it, Sam. Hawken on a gun means Hawken—and that's enough. What shall I pay you?"

"The price of a Hawken rifle is forty dollars gold," old Sam replied, with some dignity.

"And cheap at any price, you bet." The Long American fished forth his buckskin wallet ——

"You must not," I cried. But he shoved me aside.

"As well put out a man's eyes and turn him adrift on the prairie as to place him there without a good gun. I have a job in mind for you —— I also have in mind to help another friend; and when the repayment comes due, you may quibble over it between you, if you so wish."

"He goes with you, or up river?" queried Mr. Hawken.

"In the caravan. But he rides as guard for the old don's outfit."

"Ah!" Mr. Hawken lifted his bushy brows interrogatively, as for a moment he stared. "With Don Isidro, eh? A guard is needed? Is it true, then ——"

And they two retired aside, leaving me to examine my new arm. Fragments of their conversation reached me. I heard the words "treasure," "trunk," "Who knows?" "sly old cuss," "the señorita," "gold mine, they say," "mere trail talk," "dresses like a peón," and others of similar mysterious tenor, when there was interruption in shape of another customer entering the doorway.

"Hello, amigo," the Long American quickly addressed. It was the young caballero, Don Antonio. While they now briefly exchanged civilities anew, Mr. Hawken applied himself to me.

"You are for the prairies, I understand?"

"For the Santa Fé Trail."

"A stranger to that trade, I take it."

"Yes, sir. I am from Cincinnati. I never have shot a buffalo, nor an Indian; and while sick here in Independence I was robbed of all means to do so."

"You may fare well, you may fare ill," he declared; "but you are making a good start if under the guidance of that tall gentleman. He knows it all, by and large, from the Rio del Norte to the Forks of the Missouri. Strange to say," and Mr. Hawken smiled rather wistfully, "I have been at gun making all my life (my father was gunsmith at Harper's Ferry in 1812), but although I have supplied weapons to others I never have killed a buffalo, either. No, nor even a deer since I rose from apprenticeship. If I were young again—and had the time ——" He paused, his eyes kindling. "I envy you your trip," he said. "Yes, sir; fare well, fare ill, I envy you. I see that you love a good gun. If I may add powder flask and bullet pouch to it ——"

He would not listen to my expostulations. He thrust upon me a powder flask from a buffalo horn scraped very thin, with the powder measure of an antelope-prong tip suspended from it.

"They go with the piece, sir," he asserted. "They are nothing. The measure, of course, is necessary. Fill it even full—no more, no less. The pouch is plain hide; doubtless on the trail you will get a better from a squaw. The percussion caps I would advise you to carry in a disk such as this," and he passed to me a flat disk of some hard-pressed paper well paraffined. It was perforated by a myriad holes the size of a percussion cap. "With a single jab you may set a cap upon the nipple and tear it loose. Those who use the contrivance say it saves time, and considerable loss, from weather and hurry."

How kindly this far-Western world was, after all, to the greenhorn!

The Long American, accompanied by Don Antonio, had approached us.

"With your permission, Don Antonio would like to heft that new coup-counter of yourn," spoke my friend. "As you share guard with him, he has an interest in it."

I extended the weapon to the Mexican. He accepted with a bow and a murmured "Gracias—thanks, señor," and turning it over and over inspected it, lock, stock and barrel.

"Well made. There is no flint, señor?"

"No. It is percussion lock."

"Creo que sí—that is so. The Americano notion. It will shoot true, señor?"

"It is a Hawken rifle," I replied shortly, for his light manner was nettling.

"And you also are a Hawken—yes?—so that it will shoot true for you?"

"My name is not Hawken, and I never have shot the rifle, señor," I answered. "But I will shoot it against you or any other man, at any time or place."

"Bueno, bueno!" cheered the Long American. "That's tall talk. How's your range, Sam? Either I or Don Antonio will have to take the crow out of this young cock. Fill flask and pouch for him, give us a fist of caps and patches, and set us up a mark."

"There are patches and buffalo tallow in the stock; powder, ball and caps will be ready in a moment," announced Mr. Hawken, brisking. "You'll find the target range behind the shop. It is for only fifty paces,

but that will answer as a test. Go on, gentlemen. I will follow with the ammunition."

"Had I my own escopeta——" Don Antonio attempted, flushing. "To this rifle I am not accustomed."

"Neither is the señor Don Ricardo; and, for that matter, neither am I," laughed the Long American. "We are on equal footing."

In the mud-fenced enclosure behind the gunshop the Hawken firm had laid out a target range, with which to test their pieces. That is to say, at the hither end there was an adjustable rail, upon which to rest the barrels, and at the farther end there was a well-scarred butt of heavy planks backed with sand.

Mr. Hawken joined us almost instantly, bearing the essentials; and handing them over, bustled onward, to tack a square of brown paper upon the face of the butt. With a bit of charcoal he drew a small cross upon the paper, and returned, smiling.

"It is the usual mark," he said. "I know of none better. The juncture of the lines will accommodate a ball. At this distance a Hawken rifle asks no larger space. Who will be the first, gentlemen?"

"You, by ginger!" quoth the Long American. "You brag of your pieces; now go to it and sink us a hole through that squirrel's eye. But offhand, mind you; no rest."

Still smiling, Mr. Hawken deftly loaded with powder charge and patched ball, placed cap upon nipple, cocked the piece and with a faint click set the trigger. The shotgun-style butt to his shoulder and his jowl

pressed against the cheek-piece, he slowly raised the muzzle—for a second it steadied, at the level—and then spoke smartly.

"Dead center!" exclaimed the Long American, of keen eye, while we peered through the smoke whiff.

"A hair's breadth to the left, if anything," Gunsmith Hawken alleged. "But with this breeze the ball would have gone true at one hundred yards. In a shorter distance there is apt to be a trifle of drift."

Don Antonio impulsively ran forward.

"Exactly, exactly, señor!" he called. "Dios! Neither to the right nor to the left. What shooting!"

"With rifles once properly sighted I have done the same thing a thousand times. It is all in practice," apologized Gunsmith Hawken. "Who will be the next? You, sir." And he handed the rifle to the Long American. "The gun is sighted for one hundred yards pointblank, so do not cut the mark with the sight; hold well on the lower edge."

"By thunder, I'll damage your hole, if I can't improve it," the Long American muttered. "I can at least make a new pattern ——" and he loaded, set the trigger, aimed in easy fashion, and fired.

"A trifle off," he asserted. "Yep. I've scored it an '8,' Sam. With my own Betsy, here, I'll wager to better that by driving your ball six inches further and leave not a sign to show."

Don Antonio had again run forward.

"The holes touch," he cried. "The one is close

over the other. My thumb tip covers them both. Santo Dios! I would not have you shoot at me, señores."

He came panting back.

"Now the next?" invited Gunsmith Hawken. "Shall I renew the mark?"

"No," the Long American bade. "Shoot the rounds. There is room for a pawnbroker's sign, or a four-leaf clover as luck. Shoot the rounds and do your darnedest."

"Will you take your turn first, Señor Don?" inquired Gunsmith Hawken. "I will load for you."

"After the Americano," he said. "I am unsteady—I have been running ——"

"And Don Ricardo has been ill; he's weak in the arms and the pins both," my friend reminded quickly. "You're on even footing as to that."

"I seek no advantage," said I. "Let Don Antonio rest, while I shoot. One time is the same as another to me."

"No, by thunder! In fairness you shall draw lots, and Hawken shall do the loading. Then there'll be no back-tracking and belly-aching."

He picked up a straw and snapped it; extended the two pieces protruding from his fist.

"The short straw shoots first, caballeros," he directed.

We drew. The short straw fell to the don.

"The choice is God's," he lightly hazarded. "'Stá bueno. Now the gun, Señor Hawken. It shoots where it is held, you claim?"

"Absolutely."

"For the honor of New Mexico, then." And Don Antonio prepared to aim.

"For the smile of the Señorita Rosa, rather," slyly remarked the Long American. "That would be more warming, eh?"

Don Antonio flashed his white teeth.

"Santa María, yes! Country and señorita—a true caballero can risk all for no greater stake."

He aimed, shifted position, murmured, and aimed once more. The muzzle somewhat wavered ——

"You wait too long, man," uttered the Long American. "The señorita tires. Would you keep her breathless forever? When your sight touches the mark, pull trigger."

On a sudden, pull he did—Crack!—and simultaneously the bullet-hole appeared on the paper a hand's breadth wide of the two others.

"A paunch shot!" cheered the Long American. "Missed the heart and hit the gizzard. You've lost your meat, amigo. A critter with that kind of a wound will run ten miles and die to-morrow. The señorita does not smile; she laughs."

Don Antonio was staring at the mark as if incredulous.

"Nombre de Dios! It is the gun," he said. "I held exact, but the gun throws to the left. There is a trick."

"The only trick lies in hand and eye working together," reproved Mr. Hawken. "No truer rifle ever was turned out in my shop. To be sure, there will be

a slight drift, at this distance—but so slight as to require no correcting."

"It throws to the left and it throws high," the don insisted. "And now with this knowledge ——" and he sarcastically bowed to me. "You will bear that in mind when you shoot, señor?"

"Just tickle the mark with the upper edge of the sight, young man," spoke Gunsmith Hawken, to me, as he reloaded. "The bullet obeys the bead and not the muzzle, and from a Hawken rifle never varies, when the powder measure is used. You will find that this is true gun."

"For the honor of the Ohio country, then," I laughed, with a bow to the caballero, as I took the piece.

"And a señorita," bantered the Long American. "Summon the smile of your best girl, lad. I'll back the red cheeks of those Ohio Americanas against the world."

"My best girl is yet so far away in the future that she is beyond call," I answered. "I must shoot as well as I know how, without her."

"Creo que sí, creo que no—maybe yes, maybe no," rejoined the Long American. "Seems to me you are too likely a lad to be without an affair. When I was of your age I'd had a half dozen."

I set the trigger, and leveled the piece. For a moment the sight wandered across the paper, leaving a blurred trail, and I was fain to lean backward to uphold the weight of the heavy barrel. Amidst the tense silence it was a derisive chuckle from Don Antonio

which nerved my arms and put fire into my veins; and indeed now with thought of my Ohio country and the father who had taught me to bark squirrels like the Kentucky hunters, I cuddled the stock to my cheek and balanced the barrel upon my extended left arm.

The thin silver segment of the sight was just about to enter the center of the charcoal cross, when I touched trigger. The sharp jar of the recoil shook my eyes from the mark, ever so briefly—but the young don cried out exultant:

"A miss! Todos santos! He missed even the paper. The señorita herself could have done better."

"No!" That was the Long American. "I won't believe it. I heard the ball strike, I saw the paper lift —his muzzle was as steady as a pointing bitch when he pulled."

Forward he went; we followed, but I was sure that I had not missed. Impossible!

"Count the holes, señores," triumphantly challenged Don Antonio. "One, two, three!"

"Three holes, but four bullets, sir," Gunsmith Hawken pronounced. "He drove my ball with his. Aye! He barely scraped the entrance—see, the hole is a little large, a little elongated; but the one hole serves both bullets. If we dug in, we would find them together, fused. It was a fine shot."

"Dead center, plumb!" the Long American ejaculated. "The sign is plain—you can see the track of the second ball. There 'tis. Hooray!"

Don Antonio stamped passionately.

"You take me for a fool, señores? Only the saints

could make a man perform a miracle like that—and who ever heard of the saints helping a heretic! The hole is the same as before. I swear it. Válgame Dios! I am the one who knows, because I have been the one to examine, here; you others have stood off, there. The hole is no larger, no different. You say the bullet went into this hole. Why not as well into my own hole? Or somewhere else. Why not into the butt? There are fifty holes, a hundred, in the butt."

"Will you call it a tie, and will you shoot again, Señor Don?" queried Mr. Hawken. "Two balls are in the one hole. Nevertheless, since you doubt ——"

"I doubt your eyes, but not my own, señor. I have been here before. The hole is the same. If El Señor Americano wishes to prove himself a second time——" He shrugged his shoulders. "As for me, it doesn't matter. I have little faith in the gun, and I know nothing about his Ohio country or the red-cheeked señoritas—or himself. But when one engages to guard the carriage of some gente fina through the Indian country, one should show that he can call his shot. The gun is a strange gun to me. With my own escopeta ——" And he smiled wisely as he rolled a cigarette.

"Shoot it over you shall, then," blurted the Long American. "Yes; and we'll set you a mark about which there shall be no mistaking. In a jiffy, now." With his knife he whittled down a small wooden peg. "More paper, Sam. That will do." He pinned the paper to the butt, sinking the peg through the center, almost flush in a bullet hole. "There! 'Tis a good

old backwoods mark, and the man who fairly drives the peg so that the paper scales off, wins. 'Stá bueno, Señor Don Antonio? And you, my young buck?"

"We shall shoot till night and delay the caravan," muttered Don Antonio. "But—'stá bueno; that is good."

"Muy bueno—very good," I agreed.

"You the first," he stipulated, with trace of a sneer. "It is your powder and lead. Por Dios, if you drive the peg you will save not only time but expense. I have somebody waiting for me to whom I would gladly devote both instead of wasting them here."

"Only fortune waits on me, señor," I replied; "and that seems to be in no great hurry. But I will try not to delay you."

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Appears to me you wait on fortune, rather—and that it is a long way behind, in your Ohio country. I fear you will not find it ahead, señor."

So he sent me to my stand, boiling.

"Easy, now," warned the Long American. "Swallow cud, man! Coax the sight and mark to meet and kiss—you'll do nothing by main force. You're gripping and squinting as if you expected the butt to burst into feathers and war-whoop or come charging like a buffalo."

"Ha!" softly uttered the don. "If it only might. There is a difference between this kind of shooting, and another."

I needs must lower the muzzle for an instant's rest.

"I am calling the peg, sir," I said. "You may then

shoot at the hole, or anything else for which you have mind. But I am calling the peg, and will prove my other shot."

"Quién sabe?" he smiled, with that eternal "Who knows?" of the Spanish people.

I drew breath, hastily threw up the rifle, the sight rose in line with the tiny dot representing the peg, paused as of its own accord while I lessened it to a mere thread in the low rear notch and the dot of the peg hovered close above—closer, still a little closer, about to eclipse the sight—and at the very instant I touched trigger almost without forethought.

The crack and recoil startled me. I had shot too soon—I had missed! Had I? No, not entirely, maybe; for Gunsmith Hawken and the Long American cheered and the bit of paper was fluttering to the ground.

"He drove it! There's not peg enough left to make a toothpick." That was my friend.

"Pardon, señor. The ball loosened the paper—but what else?" That was Don Antonio.

"Then we'll hang it up again and you can try to do as much, amigo."

"Come on, sir, and see the damage for yourself," bade Mr. Hawken. With the caballero he advanced to the butt.

"You'll do," quoth the Long American to me. "You smashed that peg as complete as if you had it under hammer. Yes, sir; you'll do. I felt I'd made no mistake when I first clapped eyes on you."

"But I seem chiefly to have gained an enemy in the

don," I answered. "If we are due to ride the trail together ——"

I had not deceived him.

"Oh, pshaw!" he laughed. "Man, you were hostile to each other at first meeting over the table. Your bristles rose like dogs'. Now I wonder why. No, I don't wonder. You're opposites. But had you met before?"

"It was an inconsequential affair," said I. "He took me for a beggar, he dealt me alms. I may have looked the part, but he should have asked my permission."

"Oh!" said he. "Yes, yes. Hah! Well, you'll require none of his charity, I reckon. I picked you to hold your own and play foil to him, though I'm hanged if I really expected you to outmatch him so early. You shoot best when you're riled. It's a good trait. There'll be other company for you superior to his on the trail. And inside your hide you pack that which is of vastly more worth than what he exhibits outside his."

The two were returning. By his crestfallen manner the young don had admitted.

"As said," he greeted. "The devil must have guided your ball, señor. You have left me nothing at which to aim. You know the trick of the piece; I don't, but I know the difference between this kind of shooting and another. Until then, maybe, á Dios. Á Dios, señores. I have important business elsewhere."

"Á Dios, señor," we responded; and let him go.

"Plumb center, was it?" queried the Long American, as we prepared to reënter the shop.

"The ball might have been iron and the peg a magnet," Gunsmith Hawken asserted. "You are satisfied with the gun?" he inquired of me.

"Perfectly so. It is of beautiful balance, and lucky besides."

"Yes, and shoots true," he complimented, beaming. "The powder suits it well, also. That is the best English Diamond Grain, very quick and strong, far better than our American makes. Stick to it."

We took our leave of Mr. Samuel Hawken; achieved the purchase of some necessary clothing and such; and encountered a messenger evidently searching for my friend.

"The caravan is waiting to start to the first camp on," the Long American reported. "Stanley's in a hurry. Bueno! Let's cock our tails for the open. You'll get your animal and riding trappings at the rendezvous. That's the arrangement."

"But the prime arrangement—my province in the caravan," I besought. "What is it to be? I've not yet been told."

"No?" And he frowned as if annoyed by so trivial an interruption. "There's an old don and a bit of a petticoat in a carriage, bound from the States for Santa Fé and taking advantage of the caravan. You're to ride as guard for the same, along with Don Antonio. The old don commissioned me to find your like. The wages are a peso a day, mount and keep."

"A petticoat—a woman?" I pressed. "Spanish?

Young—or old?" And I knew very well without his answer. He had said "carriage"—I had heard the banter which mentioned "señorita"—I had the evidence of Don Antonio in the flesh, and of a shawled face in memory.

"Younger than you'd think natural, seeing the old boy," he twinkled. "But his daughter, and the last leaf of his family tree. A pretty baggage, too. So, come on, and I'll introduce you to your employer. After that you'll doubtless get the dark side of the carriage and the cold side of the fire, for a spell, thanks to that young sprig of an Antonio and your own guise of Americano and heretic. Still, I look to you to have introduced yourself in round fashion to the Señorita Rosa before we reach the Arkansaw, or I'll have missed my guess farther than Tony missed the bull's-eye."

CHAPTER IV

I RIDE ON GUARD

He set off with long springy step, carrying his accoutrements easily; and I had much ado to keep pace behind, despite the strength lent by sudden prosperity —for my muscles lacked blood and my breath was short.

The caravan camp lay about a mile out, as proved. As it was of the last caravans of the year, aside from it the prairie here was well-nigh barren of other camps. The great host had moved on, to the rendezvous westward.

While we neared we might see that the dingy white-topped wagons were stringing into semblance of order.

"'Ketch up,' eh? They mean to lose no more time," quoth my friend. "Well, we'll not keep 'em waiting. And Cap'n Stanley's no man to wait long on anything or anybody."

We arrived—I breathless and feeling the curious glances and the remarks critical.

"Here he is—here's the Long American!"

"Wall, old hoss? We nigh pulled on without you."

"Qué hay? Quién es, Leather Neck? Whar'd you git him?"

"Wolf meat, b' gosh! That's tall doin's you have in tow."

"He'll make you all hunt your holes before he loses 'ary hair, amigos," my friend retorted. "Save your powder."

There were some twenty of the huge Conestoga freighting wagons, their wagon-sheet coverings drawn taut, their spans of six and eight mules or oxen coupled to the chains, their drivers afoot, whips in hand, and the hunters and other horsemen sitting their saddles. A caballada or herd of loose animals was being herded together, in readiness.

The Long American, as I had anticipated (and my eyes had noted it at once), led straight to the high-wheeled Dearborn: the same Dearborn, attached to the same spike team, and postilioned by the same servant in big hat, rainbow serape and leather breeches. The curtains were still drawn.

I noted also my uncertain acquaintance, the young don, on horse beside the vehicle. Opposite from him the Long American halted and becked me forward.

"Buenos días, señor," he addressed, to the interior of the carriage. "I have brought your man. Do me the favor of receiving for yourself and the señorita your daughter my friend El Señor Don Ricardo Andrews, who will share with Don Antonio the guard upon your journey."

It was an apparently very old Spaniard who leaned and surveyed me sharply—yes, amazingly sharply, out of the keenest of piercing black eyes punctuating a sallow parchmenty face.

"Gracias. Su servidor, señor," he replied. And

he added quickly: "Dios! He is sick? Do you know him? Does he speak the language?"

"Sufficiently. I will vouch for him, señor. He has been sick, but he is muy hombre—he is of good stock, and you will see."

The Spaniard scrutinized me further.

"Can he use the rifle to good purpose?"

"Ask Don Antonio," laughed the Long American. "And you have my word."

"Then—'stá bueno," muttered the old Spaniard. "I engage him. He knows the terms? Sí. You may pick the best mule, and be quick. The start is ordered. Time is short. José!" he called. "The saddle and bridle."

"Wait here," the Long American bade, to me; and hustled away.

The Mexican peón had dismounted, to remove from atop the baggage behind (which consisted mainly of the ancient ox-hide trunk and a tent roll) a huge Spanish saddle. So I stood ill at ease and forlorn, conscious that I made no great impression. From against the side-curtains beyond the old don another pair of eyes were scrutinizing me, between the folds of a black shawl that completely enveloped the figure.

The woman, this—and by the term "señorita" a girl, the don's daughter. The eyes, lustrous, and the figure, small, piqued my curiosity, as I had piqued hers; but in the shadow the concealment was perfect.

Young Don Antonio galloped around and stopped at full speed, in gallant fashion. He now carried a

clumsy escopeta—a flint-lock smooth-bore about on a par with our American fusils—and seemed in excellent humor.

"Bueno, amigo mío," he welcomed, flashing his devilish smile. "It is you, after all? Por Dios! I did not think you would get this far."

His banter stiffened me.

"I will go as far as you, señor," I replied. "Maybe farther." And my Spanish failed me. "Confound it, sir," I said, "with a mount and a gun I ask no favor, sir, of you or anybody else."

From the interior of the carriage there sounded, I thought, a slight laugh, in feminine tone, as he curvetted about showing his horsemanship.

"Well spoken," hailed the Long American. He was back, upon his own horse, and leading a raw-boned black mule by a hide halter. He was accompanied by a heavy-set, bronzed American, in broad hat, blue flannel shirt, and belted trousers tucked into stout boots. "This is Cap'n Stanley, lad; the train boss. And here's your mule."

I shook hands with Captain Stanley—a brisk, resolute man, and, as I afterward ascertained, a veteran upon the Santa Fé Trail.

"Just keep a stiff upper lip, and you'll do," he encouraged. "I've had many an invalid in my trains; and by the time we struck the plains they were eating their meat raw and sleeping sound under a blanket, same as the rest. There's something in the air that makes red blood."

The Mexican servant had saddled and bridled my

mule. I clambered aboard with what speed I might master.

"You've got a good gun in your hands and a good critter under you," my friend vouchsafed; and Captain Stanley nodded. "You ride guard for this don outfit, you understand. Eyes open, mouth shut—that's your privilege. The don will pay you at the end of the trip. Don Isidro Gonzales is his handle complete. He's of the gentry out yonder, and a rare old bird, besides. I trust you to warm his blood toward you, in proper time. He possesses what may or may not be worth while to know of better." The Long American appeared strangely solicitous that I win favor. "As for the girl ——" and he smiled broadly. "Luck to you there, compañero. I'll wager you've not forgotten her name; you've been tossing it about with your tongue for the half hour, and unless I don't know lean bull from fat cow, you'll ere long be sweetening it after the true Spanish style."

"You guard that side; I will guard this, Señor Americano?" called Don Antonio. "Good."

'This,' I observed, was the side of the señorita.

"Are you ready, Don Isidro?" demanded Captain Stanley.

"Forward, Señor Capitán."

José, the postilion, if I might so term him, was again astride the spike mule.

"Adiós, then, señor."

"Anda con Dios—go with God, Señor Capitán."

With this ceremonious leave-taking Captain Stanley went galloping to the head of the train.

"All set?" I heard him shout.

"All set! All set!" the cries answered him, amidst the cracking of whips and yells and American curses.

"Stretch out!"

The Long American was away, for position as an outrider; the foremost wagons had started; the other wagons creakingly fell into line, and one by one moved on; presently the carriage moved also, and the caballada, urged by its herders, followed. We were off.

"Hooray for Santy Fee!"

Naturally it was a slow progress, at a methodical gait adapted to the toiling spans hauling their loads of three tons. Captain Stanley and two aides rode in the van; the hunters and other mounted attachés rode the flanks; but the teamsters trudged beside their fore wheels, just within striking distance of their lead yokes. The caballada jostled behind, in charge of the two vaqueros upon diminutive horses almost covered by the great long-skirted saddles. At the very rear there was a little squad of horsemen, closing our trail—their talk and laughter drifted forward to mingle with the talk and laughter drifting back.

The old don had lowered the carriage curtain on our side; the señorita must have lifted hers, for I caught the subdued notes of her voice as now and then she exchanged sentences with Don Antonio. He rode showily, with numerous caracoles while he held his steed under firm bit; and admitting his skill, it seemed to me that he would do better to save his animal.

Dull though it might have appeared, for me, reduced to a walking pace and to no conversation, there was

animation in having fairly embarked upon the long trail—a fulfilment of my dreams, albeit not such a fulfilment, yet, as I had anticipated if with the St. Vrain caravan. However, to Santa Fé was near eight hundred miles, or fifty days, and much might happen.

Being still within the borders of so-called civilization, the camp this night was loosely pitched. While waiting for José to build a fire from sticks collected along a creek, and place a kettle thereon, the old don and his daughter remained in the carriage. Don Isidro had raised his curtain; his grizzled head poked out inquiringly, like that of a turtle. José spread an Indian blanket upon the ground; and at his summons "Ready, señor," it was my duty to assist the don to emerge. He climbed out laboriously with many a grunt at his cramped limbs, and with a muttered "Gracias" for my services. A small man he was—a mere bundle of bones encased in a dried skin; but he had the air, nevertheless, and I felt not the least hesitation in offering him my arm.

"Gracias; muy gracias—thanks; many thanks," he again muttered, as I ensconced him upon the blanket by the fire, and José muffled him in a heavy red-and-black striped serape. "Youth must attend upon age. You have parents, my son?" he asked.

"They are dead, señor."

He crossed himself.

"God has them. That is well. You may leave me. I need nothing more. My camp is yours. Á Dios."

His sharp eyes followed me as I returned to my

mule. The señorita was coming, under excessive escort of the young don. Wrapped from ankles to crown of head in a black, fringed shawl, she scurried by me—and through token of those trim ankles and her lithe movement I sensed that the shawl concealed something indeed worth while.

Romance accompanied her; and so did Don Antonio.

There was nothing now for me save to strip my mule and turn her out to graze upon the picket rope; which I did. The wagons already were rudely lined, and their mules and oxen were being staked to grass and water. Fires were smoking. From one, the Long American jovially hailed me.

"Cómo 'stá, amigo? You walk as if the prairie was putting some life into you. Feeling wolfish?"

"I feel fine, thank you," I assured, admitting also to a great emptiness in the stomach region.

"You'll be clinching your teeth in the buffalo hump, all right, before many days; yes, and sucking marrow, too. Sit in, man. What's your hurry?"

I joined his group. The mess cook was preparing a stew of beef; several of the men, my friend among them, were roasting slices of the raw meat, held on ramrods to the blaze. What was my hurry, in fact—except, of course, hunger, and, I must inwardly confess, a desire to see beneath the black shawl?

"Cut your own hunk and fall to," I was invited. "It's every man for himself, and cuss the cook."

But I civilly declined, not knowing whether the old don might not consider it ill courtesy to desert his fire for another.

"I have guard duty, thank you, gentlemen," I apologized, tortured by the odor of crisping beef. "Another time."

"And soft duty, too," hazarded one of the men. "By thunder, I'm not so old but that I'd like to swap jobs with you."

"Yes, an' get the wrong side the carriage an' the wrong side the fire, b' gorry!" laughed an Irishman. "Faith, an' don't I know them people from t' other end o' the trail? Wid voices like angels an' the heart o' the ould Nick? Callin' ivery American a heretic, when many of us 've been blessed by the priest—God be good to him!"

"Well, I'll have no loose talk about the don, boys," warned the Long American. "Mark that. Let him alone. And let the girl alone. This lad has his duty, and I reckon he knows it. I've vouched for him, myself."

"Sure, a man can envy him his luck in ridin' the trail within touch of a pretty gal, even if there's the old man between," replied somebody. "It's better once in a while 'Buenos días-ing, señorita' an' 'Mucho bueno-ing, señor,' than yelling 'Whoa-haw! Gee-up!' all the day, to a string of bulls."

"Specially if there's a gold mine a-makin' the carriage spring easy in the ruts," put in another.

"Sure an' has he his gould mine in his trunk?" blurted the Irishman.

"Ask Old Hoss, here. Yes, an' ask the greenhorn. There's something in the wind if not in the trunk, you bet. I wasn't born yesterday, myself. To my thinkin',

that carriage totes what would excuse a white man for turnin' Mexican."

I heard the Long American growl renewed warning at the free talk; but the servant, José, was approaching, as if looking for me, and with a "Good-night, gentlemen," I withdrew. This had again been a reference to some gold mine, in connection with the old don; and as yet was none of my business, so far as I knew.

"Don Isidro sends word that he would have El Señor Americano eat at his fire," José announced, touching his brim. "They are ready."

"Gracias, amigo," I acknowledged; and followed him back.

The trunk had been removed from the carriage; probably had been placed within the tent erected facing the fire. The old don and the señorita were seated at the doorway of the tent, Don Antonio close at one side, his escopeta in his lap.

The señorita had dropped her shawl from her head, and was deftly retouching her smooth hair, so that by the flicker of the flames I saw her unveiled. In that glossy black coiffeur she was all that heart of man might desire. Ah, but she was beautiful with a contrast of loveliness which sent a thrill adown the air. She was white, and black, vivified by the red of full lips—very white, very black, and temptingly red; and of a demure roguishness of countenance which boded a lively spirit.

Only a brief sight I had; far too brief, for when her wide, round eyes under curved, tapering brows espied me nearing behind José, she quickly lifted her

shawl upon her head again; and as I arrived I saw, in the flesh, merely the long lashes and the piquant little nose framed by the mysterious rebozo.

"Our fire is yours, señor," the old don greeted gravely. "Do us the favor to be seated. All here is yours (and I wished that the same might be true, from the heart, rather than simple speech matter, from the lips). José will serve you with such little as we have. We are poor, but we are of the gente fina (better class)."

With murmured thanks I seated myself at the opposite side of the fire. José served me, as them, with a tortilla upon which he dished a portion of Spanish stew from the kettle. He filled our cups with coffee.

Despite the hospitality I was still the stranger, and my poor practice with rapid Spanish kept me silent. So I was forced to sit dumb and awkward. Amidst the conversation the girl now and then laughed musically; she opened her shawl only enough to admit food into those lips; and whenever she caught my furtive glances (for I could not but gaze) she abruptly lowered her eyes and kept them down until —— But I tried my best not to act the boor.

We had finished. José lighted their cigarritos for them.

"You have had sufficient, señor?" spoke the old don, across. "It was little, but our all. Maybe in the buffalo country—you hunt the buffalo?"

"Not as yet, señor," I answered. "And the meal to me was very good. I ask no more. When we reach

the buffalo country, I hope to repay your courtesy with that meat, if you desire."

"Such fare as we have to offer is in the bargain," he replied. "You have been ill, señor; Don Antonio has hunted the buffalo and we shall require only a trifling amount. We probably will meet with the ciboleros and they will supply us."

"Oh, the buffalo-hunters!" exclaimed the girl. "Santa María! It will be many days yet."

"What do you wish, señorita mía?" Don Antonio petulantly demanded. "Why look to the ciboleros, when I am here? Poder de Dios, Don Isidro! If it is buffalo meat, buffalo meat you shall have. This Americano will guard the carriage—he and José. He has his gun—very good. José shall have my escopeta and I will kill buffalo with my pistola. It is easy, when one knows. There is no fear of lacking buffalo meat while I am with you. I am indeed a buffalo hunter."

"Gracias á Dios—thank God!" muttered José, under his peaked hat, as he replenished the fire. "Buffalo meat is strong meat, and we can depend upon a caballero of the blue blood and not upon a white-faced Yankee."

"El Americano can shoot. I think he can ride. Maybe when we reach the buffalo country he will have the strength to try," the girl lisped, rather mischievously.

"With your permission, señorita and señores," I hastily craved, rising. They may have underestimated my Spanish. The talk was growing over personal for

my pride. Whereupon I strolled to the edge of the darkness. I caught Don Antonio's indignant retort.

"A heretic beggar, my Rosa! I tell you he is the same to whom I gave the coin. And he is a greenhorn; he has never hunted the buffalo—he is from the east of North America. I have hunted them with escopeta, pistola and lanza. I have won at the cock-racing and the bull-tailing. He is hired to guard the carriage. That is well. I am to ride at your side, but you shall also see me hunt the buffalo like a true caballero ——"

"Sí, sí!" avouched old José.

"Basta—enough!" spoke Don Isidro. "We shall have meat without quarreling over it. Of that I am sure. The young American is recommended by Don Juan, to help Don Antonio guard us. And Don Antonio will show these teamsters and other Americanos how a gentleman of New Mexico kills the buffalo."

But I resolved, as I lingered bitterly in the shadows, that a certain American greenhorn should prove to them his father's blood.

The camp-fires of the caravan gleamed in a bevy beyond us. Night had settled upon the prairie. Through the darkness the voices of the various messes pierced blatant, as rough-and-ready men sang, bragged and bantered. Oxen lowed, mules hee-hawed, the fewer horses snorted at the slinking forms of the small prairie-wolves. Amidst all this I was the alien—yet somehow felt at home.

When I turned back to our fire, the flaps of the tent had been closed. The old don and his daughter

were to sleep within. I was just in time, for a slender voice issued, with:

"Á Dios, señores. Buenas noches."

She had used the plural address!

"Muy buenas noches, señorita," we responded, Don Antonio and I, together.

"By your leave, señor, we have arranged the night guard," said Don Antonio, politely, to me. "You are tired. You shall sleep first for three hours, while José watches. Then you will do us the favor of keeping watch for three hours—the mid-watch. I will then be on the alerta till the morning, through the danger hours."

"There are no Indians yet," muttered old José, who seemed privileged to vent his private opinions.

"That will do," Antonio rebuked. "Where there are no Indians, they are most to be expected. We have precious treasure in that tent, amigos. We are men; we must guard it. As for you, Señor Americano, should you hear prowlers about, awaken me. The caravan is composed of—who knows? Maybe ladrones (bandits) among them."

"I will take care of my watch; do you take care of yours," I answered. "Americans do not harm old men and girls."

"God grant," he piously voiced. And he added the proverb: "Plunder in the heart puts a knife in the hand."

He and I rolled ourselves in our blankets, our feet to the fire, leaving José importantly on guard with the escopeta. I speedily fell asleep, to dream many things,

through which the señorita figured—and was rescuing her from a charge not of Indians but of buffalo, when José's hand upon my forehead aroused me.

"It is your hour, señor."

The mid-watch passed uneventful. The stars shone brightly, the cool prairie air wafted in gentle gusts. The wolves, scouting for refuse, occasionally lifted shrill yappy chorus. The animals coughed and snorted. The camp-fires had died, and from the caravan there was no sound.

The caravan had not yet mounted guard save over the caballada to prevent its members from straying back toward Independence; and I somewhat wondered why these precautions of ours, almost as severe as if the tent had been pitched in the very Indian country.

Truly the Mexican people were a timid folk, their minds upon bandits (and naturally enough, judging by reports from their own domain), to the extent that they deemed that an old man and a girl, housed in a tent only a few miles from the Missouri border, would not be safe with three of us sleeping at the doorway. And then, the references to that trunk rang insistent. Gold in it? A gold mine in it? José had carried it easily in his two arms, for I had witnessed him untie it.

That notion was sheer romance. Some day I would ask the Long American, pointblank. As to the present, it pleased me to think that the treasure which I guarded lay breathing sweetly, and was safe while I was near and could lift a rifle.

At the proper hour by my father's watch I awakened Don Antonio.

"Alerta!" he instantly responded, springing up. No sluggard, he. So I resigned my charge to him, and slept again until daybreak and the general movement that betokened preparations for the onward march.

José was building the fire. Don Antonio was sitting nodding, enveloped in his serape, his flint-lock between his knees. Within the tent there was a slight stirring, and the murmur of low voices. Soon José passed in a vessel of warm water. The old don emerged, with courteous "Buenos días, señores," and advanced to spread his withered hands to the blaze.

"You are rested, señor?" he addressed, to me.

"I am all well, thank you, señor," I assured; which he acknowledged with a congratulatory "God be praised!"

Up the line the breakfast fires were smoking in the misty air, and men were busy among the wagons and the animals. I waited as long as I dared; then mindful of my assumed duties I went and fetched in the two saddle brutes, that we should not be delayed.

From Don Isidro this won an approving nod; and Antonio sprang to his feet, still drowsy, to utter a hasty "Pardon, señor," as I returned from having driven the picket pins afresh.

But the sly rascal had been watching me, I knew.

"This establishes no precedent, Mister Tony," thought I. "I serve not your interests, but mine own."

By grace of fortune, not until now did the tent

flaps open and the señorita step out, brightening the day although enwrapped as she was in that black shawl.

She proffered her sweet "Buenos días" as "good-morning," and modestly seated herself upon the blanket by her father's side, her small feet well under her.

Served by José we breakfasted as we had supped, but almost in silence; finished by eating our tortilla plates, which left few dishes to be washed.

José supplied corn-husk cigarettes to father and daughter; Don Antonio ceremoniously passed me husk and tobacco, and at my clumsy efforts the girl exclaimed:

"Señor! José! The American does not know. Here—I will do it."

She rolled, from her own stock mysteriously produced, and with eyes downcast held out to me the brown cylinder, moistened by her lips.

I could not but accept—at first appreciative of the favor, then shamed by Don Antonio's low, reproachful:

"Ah, my Rosa! Would that I had never learned, either. But your heart is all charity, querida. A coin for him, and now a cigarette! For me——" He leaped up, as if to show his mettle. "Adiós. I go to bring in the animals. It is time."

He was all agility as he ran for his horse. Pricked by his forehandedness I ran after. Such was his quickness and such the obstinacy of my mule that he had already saddled ere I had clapped on the sweatpad. The heavy cumbersome saddle required my utmost strength.

With wave of arm he dashed away at full speed as though bound for Santa Fé instead of for the carriage team grazing only a score of rods out. And by the time that I had mounted, leaning from his stirrup he had pulled their picket pins. Shouting freely he turned them for the carriage, while José shambled to head them and put them to the vehicle.

"A true caballero who rides like a vaquero," José addressed them. "Whoa, now! Do you think he is still after you?"

Thereby I was given to understand that my brief sun had suffered eclipse.

"Ketch up! Ketch up!" welled the slogan along the line. Order in apparent confusion reigned.

Still smiling at his exploit, with hat doffed Don Antonio escorted the señorita to the carriage; I attended upon the old don. The much-alert Antonio stationed himself, in cavalier pose upon the saddle, at the head of the spike mule while José bore out the trunk, tied it and the other baggage behind ——

Captain Stanley galloped back to us.

"All set?"

"Vamos! We are ready," replied Antonio. "At your service, Señor Capitán."

"All set? All set? Stretch out!"

The fore of the caravan moved; wagon after wagon veered into line, to the popping of whips and the creak of boxes and the shouts of the teamsters. José climbed upon the spike mule, and we also were off—Don Antonio on the girl's side, I at the side of Don Isidro, as yesterday.

This day the curtains were not drawn, so I had the more pleasure in the march, for I might watch her profile. Yet Antonio's words continued to rankle. Charity? She, then, had bestowed the coin; was the cigarette in the same category? Charity to me, of my name and rightful station? I could not abide that! Whatsoever I won from the Señorita Rosa should not smack of her charity. Not now.

CHAPTER V

I CHASE THE BUFFALO

TRULY, the prairie air worked marvels upon a sick frame, for within three days I was so fully restored that I hardly knew myself.

"Creo que ahora—I think that now you are much of a man, señor; no?" granted even José; and when I encountered the Long American he viewed me unreservedly.

"Half wild hoss, half alligator, eh?" he appraised. "I told you you weren't wolf meat yet, compañero. You'll be killing your own buffalo and eating him, too, inside a day or so."

My heart seized at the promise.

"Are we near the buffalo country, then?"

"Marrow bones in the fire and humps in the pot before you've learned to roll a cigarrito; that's my guess. Yes, and a smile for you from the señorita, if you're the man I take you to be."

"How so?"

He laughed.

"You'll have a chance to shine. But that young Tony can ride. They're devils at riding, those caballeros, specially when a girl is watching. So look out he doesn't bag more game than you think of, and nail your pelt to the barn door into the bargain. How goes it with you and el señor mayor?"

"The old don? He's civil. We exchange scarce a dozen words, but I do my duty."

"Bueno. There's no smarter old hombre in New Mexico. Habla poco y sabe mucho—talks little and knows much. Doesn't act like he was a rico, does he?"

"Rich? No," I boldly challenged. "One would think him as poor and empty as that trunk José totes about."

"You can't always price a beaver skin by the size of the stretching hoop, nor by the heft of the graining block," my friend enigmatically proclaimed. "Expect in a scrimmage you'd grab the gal and leave the old man and trunk?"

"That I would."

"Antonio wouldn't."

"Well, sir, what's in that trunk, if you know?" I demanded.

"The more I don't. A red flannel petticoat and a sheepskin shirt, like as not. I've seen ricos who traveled with even less. So good luck to you."

When we had put behind us the so-termed border of which Council Grove and the forking of the two great trails, one to the Oregon, one to Santa Fé, were the western limit, we had entered upon the wide reach of uninhabited prairie that stretches to the Valley of the Arkansas.

Each day was much like its predecessor; at night corral was formed by parking the wagons, aslant, their tongues outside, their fore wheels almost touching rear wheels, in a compact circle, with an opening for convenience of men and beasts in case of alarm.

In the parking our carriage, which would be small protection, took no part. As at the start we pitched our tent beside it, but near to the corral opening; and the trunk was brought into the tent, each time, by the faithful José.

The hunters officiating for the caravan had little to do, save now and then chase, for exercise, a stray wolf, or fetch down, when fortune favored them, an antelope or two. But on the second morrow after my conversation with the Long American we might observe that the hunters ranged farther upon either flank and before, and that the teamsters trudged with an expectant air intensified at every distant gunshot and at every peering by some mounted figure upon a distant rise.

This evening "buffalo" was the current topic; for fresh sign had been discovered, and one mess was jubilant over the tough flesh of an old abandoned bull, whose end had been only a little hastened by a bullet.

"To-morrow night, and we, too, shall have buffalo meat, Señorita Rosa," vaunted Don Antonio. "Sí!"

"De veras—really? Shall we meet with the buffalo hunters?"

"De veras, and de veras, señorita mía. But you need not look so far for a cibolero. Nombre de Dios, not when you have with you a caballero ready to lay at your feet anything that you desire! A buffalo? One? Two? Three?"

"My poor feet would not accommodate so many, thank you, amigo mío," she laughed. "No, large though you might think them! And you may wish to

leave one buffalo for the Señor Americano and those other Americans."

"Some one must guard you and your señor father, and some one must bring the meat. As for those other Americans, they can look out for themselves. If with your permission, then to-morrow I shall turn cibolero —but I will be on guard, also, in my heart, my Rosa. A call, and I shall come; that I promise."

"Dragging the buffalo?"

"Naturalmente—of course." And they laughed together.

"And you, Señor Andrews? We may depend upon you for company while the wild ciboleros are out?" Don Isidro queried, with courteous inflection, across to me.

"It shall be my pleasure, señor—as well as my duty if such be your own pleasure. I do not claim to be a buffalo hunter like Don Antonio, although I hope to learn a little. The trail is long yet"—and I vented my real feelings in English: "and a short horse is soon curried."

The girl glanced so quickly that I was a shade alarmed lest the English had been understood. I had no wish to appear meanly resentful, nor jealous of Antonio. I was hired, he was free.

However, the old don only questioned placidly:

"Cómo—what?"

"It was something for which I have no Spanish, señor," I apologized. "There are many words I do not yet know. I referred to my mule, which is poorly trained, I fear, for the buffalo chase."

About ten in the morning the sudden loud cries of "Buffalo! The buffalo!" broke from the head of our column and traveled at lightning speed down the toiling line. The Long American had signaled with his hat—we might see him, now, running his horse in curious figures, far to the left of the route, while a companion, joining him, flourished an exultant arm.

"Buff'ler! Hooray, boys! Meat in the pots!"

The excitement fastened upon every man and seemed to infect even the beasts. Riders galloped pell-mell, tearing across the sandy swells amidst which the trail wound, and all focusing upon the Long American. The teamsters grabbed their guns from the wagons, lashed their animals, and oxen and mules quickened pace.

"Hasten, José!" bade the old don, craning anxiously. We ambled, pressing in the wake of the Conestoga before; the carriage jolted; from her side the señorita, dropping her shawl, peered eager.

"Dónde están—where are they? Will we be too late, Antonio?" I heard her asking.

His horse was curvetting and fretting under spur and bit.

"Have patience, my Rosa. It is too far. I do not wish to tire my horse for nothing. Let the Americans start the game. Then you will see me ride."

"They may come this way—they will run up wind," muttered the old don, out of knowledge for which one might not have given him credit.

An assistant wagon-master galloped down along the line.

"Look to yore weepons an' yore critters, men," he warned. "Thar's like to be a stampede an' the boys mayn't head 'em."

The horsemen scouring among the swales had disappeared; and on a sudden we heard a rifle shot—another—and another; still more, and a continuous staccato.

"Dios! They have them!" exclaimed the old don.

The teamsters shouted hoarsely.

"Watch out for yore critters!"

"Oh, they are coming! María madre! The cibolos!" uttered the señorita.

A great dust cloud had arisen against the horizon before and to the left. And now a blackish mass moved from under it; rolling over a bare ridge and pouring down as if to cross our very trail ahead. The buffalo! Yes, and the hunters, fringing the edges, swerving in and out, while their guns puffed drab smoke. A dull thunder boomed through the clear air and filled our ears.

"Corral! Corral!"

"Halt, everybody!"

"No! Go on! They'll cl'ar us."

"They won't! They'll run squar' into us."

"Split 'em with yore guns!"

"Tarnation take them hunters!"

"No! They're figgerin' on downin' meat right hyar."

"We'll all be meat if they don't watch out."

Such was the confusion.

Herd and hunters were coming. The uproar swelled —a bellowing, a thundering, punctuated by the gunshots.

"God help us," prayed the old don, clutching the carriage post with tremulous hand; but he breathed fast; there was fire in his sharp, black eyes.

"Those Americans are crazy. The devil is in them," José called back.

"Mira—see! If that is to run the buffalo ——!" the girl faltered. "You must not go, Antonio." And she cried out with quick fervor. "Oh, it is grand! How they ride! How they shoot! They are killing. They are indeed men. But look! What is happening now?"

For the assistant wagon-master and two others (our only mounted guards) had spurred right forward into the face of the onward thundering herd. They waved their hats, their guns belched—again, and yet again. Forward ran the leading teamsters, leaving their wagons. Splitting, the herd flowed by the three and was shunted farther apart by the dancing, gesticulating, volleying teamsters; the gap widened, and in a moment the brutes were streaming on, in two divisions, to right and left, while the caravan animals plunged and cringed in frenzy.

The foremost buffalo had arrived opposite us; and suddenly all the near vista was alive with the shaggy forms, with the horsemen veering after, with the teamsters running aside, aiming, firing—buffalo staggered, dodged, lumbered bleeding; the wagon teams were in torment of fear; José appealed with Spanish

oaths as he tried to control his spike mule; and Don Antonio blurted shrilly:

"Take my gun, José. Á Dios, señorita. To the hunt! I will tail one for you—I am a cibolero!"

He dashed out like an arrow launched from a bow. That was too much. The hunt was in my blood also. I must have stiffened, with clenched hand, and whirled my mule, for the voice of Don Isidro rang in my ears.

"Vaya—go, señor!"

I was away. There were buffalo upon my side—plenty of them, their matted forelocks and bulging eyes plain as they tore on through smoke and dust or recoiled from the teamsters' muzzles; but I made after Don Antonio.

Thank God, my mule had legs; she showed that she could run like a deer, and I urged her hard. The young don had the start, but the gap between the two currents of buffalo ever widened, and we had some little distance to go.

An old bull, slightly wounded, seemed to be Antonio's aim; doubtless because it was a giant of a bull and worthy the attack of a caballero. Now all the prairie was the scene of single combats, as the hunters endeavored to down their meat within easy distance; several were butchering, their arms red to the elbows as they slashed and hacked. Through the ever-shifting fantasy of shout and shot and bloody forms snorting pain and defiance Don Antonio raced madly, and I in his wake.

The bull, fighting hot, had stopped confused, challenging the foe one and all. Magnificent he stood

there, braced, glaring right and left; and at him charged Don Antonio, riding like an Indian (as I could not but imagine), the leathery wings of his stirrups sweeping the ground, so low was stretched his horse.

He pulled short, with a high cry, to curb his fretting animal in the bull's very face, while he waved his arm at the carriage, from which the señorita was gazing. Scarce time he had. With astonishing spryness for such bulk the bull also charged—sprang forward with the agility of a huge cat; and so quickly that his horns fairly grazed the haunch of the sideways leaping horse.

He turned, with the horse; face over shoulder young Antonio raced in flight, the monster closely pursuing; suddenly he yawed his mount, and reined; the bull sped by, and now spurring to gain his flank the don reached for his tail.

I did not wait to see the feat. A smaller beast, plunging on unmolested, caught my eye. My mule answered to spur and rein. The buffalo was tired; it was a fat heifer and better meat by far than the bull. We overhauled her—praise be, I might prove myself. Soon my mule's nose was at her flank. The froth from her hanging tongue had spattered her sleek brown hips. At every lunge of her heavy fore quarters she exhaled gruntingly. Her eye rolled back at me and her tail quirked with her efforts.

Inch by inch we gained. 'Twas now or never, and I wondered if the señorita was looking. I had chosen the proper side. The short-barreled Hawken lay across my saddle, and I cocked it and set the trigger.

The mule ran so easily that the muzzle hardly jarred. I dropped reins, slightly depressed the barrel, sense of touch and eye told me that the ball was going true, and I touched trigger—Crack!

Instantaneously a dull red spot appeared back of her shoulder and the heavy ball had ploughed on through her lungs. She sprang convulsive—no, her heart, her heart! The shot was a little high, but enough; for her mouth gushed blood, the dull red spot brightened and spurted crimson, and with a groan down she pitched, sending the sand flying. She was mine!

Our momentum carried me by. I wheeled the mule, to leave my hat as token, for I must have another of the animals; the lust of ambition possessed me. And as I paused, to reload my piece, I sought for the carriage, for Don Antonio, and for fresh conquest. Then I heard—I was certain that I heard, although I was nowhere near to her—a scream from the señorita. I heard also shouts of alarm; about that there could be no mistake; and I strained with roving eye for the cause.

The train was still in confusion of surging mules and oxen, careening wagons, and running, swearing men; the prairie was dotted with carcasses, with toiling butchers, and reeling beasts amidst which horsemen darted hither and thither poising rifle and pistol. Then I glimpsed the young don.

They held my vision—he and the bull. They were not far, but were clear of the slackening mêlée, and with responsive shout, for I was nearest, I jabbed in the spurs and rode to the rescue.

He had not thrown the bull by the tail—a vaquero trick to be applied to a domestic, if untamed, animal, with good chance of success, but foolhardy in the case of a rampant beast like this one, bred to the free life. His horse's flank was reddened from a horn gash; he was clinging in desperate flight, the bull at his very sash ends; he had lost his silvered hat—but his dragoon pistol was out, and now as he swerved his mount aside just in time, and the burly monster bored past, he fired.

At the impact of the ball the bull flicked tasseled tail; Don Antonio cheered, threw away his pistol, and snatched loose his coil of reata. He pursued, the while I tore in at a tangent.

'Twas another foolhardy play; but swinging the loop, as his horse ate the distance, he cast. The loop widened, and settled, and he drew taut. His horse braced feet, and held staunch; the bull momentarily staggered, to the tug of the tether; his head twisted about, his eyes bulged farther and his tongue dripped bloody slaver.

All the time (but no great time) I was trying to reload. The powder spilled, the bullets refused to seat, the deuce was sporting with my hasty fingers.

The bull whirled end for end; he set himself, and the braided hair rope stretched until it hummed. The braced hoofs of the horse slipped, slipped ——

"Cut that rope! Cut it!" bawled the chorus.

Others were coming, but I was to be the first. Don Antonio's teeth flashed whitely; he fumbled for his knife, and the rope broke with rifle report. To the

rebound the bull lurched one way; the lighter horse overturned, the other way, hoofs thrashing, and Don Antonio went sprawling across the sandy sod.

The bull gathered himself, first. He charged redly for the things upon the ground. But the don was up, the horse was up; which would it be? And near at hand I shouted wildly.

God be praised, the bull chose the larger thing: the horse. Away they raced, again, pursuer and pursued —NO! The horse continued; not the buffalo, for after a few short plunges he reversed course as if by a feint. He had bethought of an easier enemy.

"Lie flat! Lie flat, man! Don't run."

There were a dozen warnings, coupled with oaths; but the don had scrambled to his feet and stumbling in his urgency was trying for his pistol. I caught glimpse of his pale, sweat-smeared face as he agonizedly glanced my way, and now, almost but not quite arrived, I must shoot.

The bead was rapidly drawn; the ball slapped smartly and a waft of dust flew from behind the lion-mane. The bull hunched at the shock—barely long enough for me to dash in between him and Don Antonio and toll him if I might.

The mule was true to rein and spur as I swung her well-nigh into his very breath. He saw red, down went his head, on he came, in new direction; and clinging with my knees I let her go while I reloaded.

Again the shouts; again (I thought) the scream! The bull was about, on a pivot, questing the don. "Down, man! Lie down!" But no use; the young

fool could not understand. I also turned. How I had reloaded so quickly I did not know; the gun had been charged, capped and cocked by a miracle. Other figures were rushing in; the Long American loomed large; there were shots, a scurry, and suddenly I was beside the bull once more, seeking vital spot. He veered, before I had set trigger; his horn hooked under the mule's shoulder and down we all crashed together, as seemed to me, in reek of dust and hot animal smell.

Over and over I rolled, thinking mainly of holding fast to the rifle. They say that I was catapulted clear across the bull's back and that his blind fury carried him straight across the struggling mule. At any event, from my knees I saw him, the first of objects; and next, Don Antonio running for me.

The bull saw—saw him, not me; he launched himself again, head on. It was now or never, but of what avail was a ball against that matted skull?

There were shouts renewed—"Lay down! Down, both of you!"—and a converging of horsemen, while the sight on my rifle steadied an instant, and as the panting don passed I fired and fell aside.

Well it was that I had flung myself as far as I might. The huge bulk ploughed the very place where I had knelt. There it lay, dead before crushing my extended foot almost to bursting; and there was Don Antonio, halted wonderingly; and here was the Long American, arrived, cheering.

"An eye shot! Whoopee! See for yourselves."

And here I lay, staring giddily from an elbow, with

the scene apparently distant but sharpened as by a spy-glass.

The Long American vaulted off and strode to me.

"Hurt, lad?"

I searched myself.

"No, sir." The foot was twinging. "I think not. I could get up, if ——"

"We'll roll him clear. You lie still. By thunder, but you shot center that time."

"It was an accident."

"Accident or no, it was that or nothing. Eh, boys?"

Young Don Antonio stood, still panting, over me.

"My life is yours, señor," he gasped. "Por Dios! And yet you were no cibolero!"

"Luck was with me, señor," I answered.

They were rolling the carcass free of me, and I might withdraw my foot. It came—it followed directions; and I arose, to limp.

A hunter stuck his grimy finger into the bull's eye-socket.

"Your mark," he said, to me. "Hah! If ever you level bar'l toward me, I'm Davy Crockett's coon. You bet! Running shot, too!" And he continued to swear admiringly, while the little group of listeners nodded and murmured.

"An accident, gentlemen," I vainly insisted. "No man can claim more."

"You're a cute young fellow," they retorted. "We thought you were a greenhorn on the prairie, at that. By the eternal, but with hoss an' gun—whoopee!"

"The loan of your mule, a moment, señor." That was Don Antonio, looking altogether wretched. Somebody had caught my mule; she was standing by, seemingly sound. "I shall be further your debtor, if such is possible."

"Certainly," I replied.

He mounted, took down the reata which hung from the high pommel, and was away instantly, with ruthless spur, riding as, after all, only he could ride. A moment more and he was in chase of his horse; another rider—José, coming from the carriage on the spike mule—headed the animal; and swooping in, Don Antonio neatly placed his noose.

He bade José to retrieve hat and pistol, and returned, leading his captive. His eye was brighter.

"Dios! If my rope had not broken, amigo! I would have played him, I would have tailed him, I would have dragged him to the carriage and the feet of the señorita. But no matter. God sent you. We will go back. They ask it. José will butcher. You have killed a cow? Muy bien! She shall be our meat. From this bull we shall take only the trophy."

He sprang from the saddle, and with two slashes of his knife had cut the tassel from the short slender tail.

The Long American and fellows already had scattered, to wield knives themselves. Everywhere the butchers were busy. The don and I trotted for the carriage, and he ever waxed the more gay.

"The fortune of the hunt, amigo. En el nombre! But next time always beckons."

When we arrived the caravan had been straightened

out; there were preparations as for camp. The twain in the carriage gazed expectantly at our approach, and I noted that the old don's hands were a-tremble as he leaned to peer. The señorita's face was very white, making her wide, lustrous black eyes the wider, the blacker, the lovelier. She was uncovered.

"Is any one hurt?" Don Isidro quaveringly hailed.

The señorita sank back, weak.

"You are safe? You are unharmed? We saw you —O Santísima, what a sight!" And I could have vowed with bitterness that she gazed full at Don Antonio. He accepted, as his right. I was nothing.

"Safe indeed, Rosa mía. And you saw? Ah! You know. It was that reata. If the reata had held ——! I would have tired his thick neck, carita; there have been many bulls, before him. Presently he would have charged again, I would have let him by, I would have tailed him, tied his hocks, dragged him to you, and you should have set your little foot upon his big head. But luck—bah! The reata broke, the horse fell, the brute came—and then the American. Therefore this is all, excepting the cow out yonder for our meat." And he would have handed in to her the tassel of the tail.

She shrank from it.

"No. I would not touch it. We saw all, and that is enough. It was terrible—the running, the dodging, the shooting, and at the last, the bull close upon you, El Americano to his knees, the demon coming—holy angels!"

She pressed her hands to her eyes; he soothed her

with the light words of a caballero. Suddenly she bared her face, and gazed straight at me as I sat my mule, my foot paining cruelly.

"El Señor Americano says not a word, for all that he was there. He is a brave man indeed, and a caballero. He has not been presented to me. Will not my father present to me the señor, Don Ricardo, whom I desire to know?"

"Pardon. I kiss your feet, señorita mía," stammered Don Antonio, flushing. "Come, mi amigo," he called, to me. "The Señorita Rosa asks for you."

He presented me in due form. For an amazing instant the little hand lay in my rough palm—and I realized that the custom was foreign to her up-bringing.

"I kiss your feet, and your hands, too, señorita," I blurted.

"But your deeds are greater than your words, we find, señor," she demurely said. "My father and I are glad to have you with us. We shall fear nothing."

I might only murmur, confused, and retire with a tremendous thumping of the heart, to help José bring in the meat from the cow. My foot no longer pained; as a matter of fact, it had been protected by the heavy boot and the soft sandy soil.

The caravan made dry camp for the rest of the day, and for the night. Meat was plentiful. Soon it was strung in tiers of drying strips, from all the wagon bows and in the smudge of the fires; and squatting around kettles and coals the messes tore with knife and

teeth at fat humps while they roasted marrow bones for cracking.

We at our fire likewise were merry. Undeterred by a certain steely suavity directed at me by the young Antonio (who naturally was nettled by his ill fortune in the chase) I was emboldened to bear my part right manfully, so that I heard José mutter, to himself:

"He acted like a man and he speaks like a caballero, for all that he is an American and a heretic."

In the morning, well content with its swaying festoons of meat strips, and every man full to the nozzle, the caravan resumed its march up the Valley of the Arkansas, for the Cimarron Crossing.

The señorita and her father remained gracious toward me, so that I was now contented also.

CHAPTER VI

I WIN MY SPURS

As we moved on and on by steady stages the caravan discipline grew more strict: a squad of the hunters rode the advance, and other horsemen squads patrolled out upon either hand, searching the near country; at night, corral was regularly formed, with the mules picketed and the oxen under herd. Don Antonio, José and I alternated watches, as before.

But never an Indian was sighted, nor scarce any moving object whatsoever except small game. The absence of buffalo occasioned some comment, of disappointment and also of apprehension—for Indian hunting parties may have been sweeping the trail. However, there were no signs of the chase; and now where there were no buffalo, there probably would be no Indians.

"Thanks to God, we are half-way," spoke the old don, when, twenty-four days out of Independence, we were safely arrived at the Cimarron Crossing of the Arkansas. "From here on we shall be in my own land. Dios y Libertad!"

"Dios y Libertad!" the señorita echoed. "My heart is waiting for a sight of Santa Fé."

"It is a long distance yet, my child," he responded.

"And will seem all the longer because we shall begin to count the marches."

"A beautiful city, señorita?" I queried.

"It is home, señor, and home is always beautiful. My father was born there, and my mother; and his parents and her parents."

"Ah, Santa Fé!" cried Don Antonio, caracoling his horse. "Those American cities—bah! It is only in Santa Fé that one really lives."

"The houses then are beautiful, señor?" I asked.

"The most beautiful houses, the most beautiful streets, and the most beautiful women in the world, amigo. I have seen your St. Louis. It seems to me that the Americans live like barbarians."

"Sí, sí!" from his spike mule old José grunted. "But in Santa Fé we live comfortably, like Christians. There you find the true gente fina."

Captain Stanley had elected to take the short cut southwest from the Arkansas, instead of proceeding on west, up-river to Bents' Fort. The Arkansas was low, as good omen, and the carriage crossed without difficulty in the muddy swirl left by the Conestoga just before: the water scarcely to the hubs of the high wheels, José belaboring his mule and Don Antonio and I tugging with our reatas attached to the front axle-tree.

"God be thanked," again praised the old don. "We are on Mexican soil and good dry land. It will be dry enough for the next three days, too," he cackled.

Camp was made this evening here upon the sandy south bank of the Arkansas, but I could not see that

this land of the Province of Northern Mexico looked vastly different from the land of the United States, a rifle-shot across the shallow current.

According to the talk, there now lay ahead of us a desert stretch of some sixty miles, barren of vegetation and virtually waterless. By orders every water cask was filled. Captain Stanley announced that we should achieve the dry march in three days—he dared not extend the time farther.

We had forded the Arkansas none too soon. During the night we heard heavy thunder to the west; and in the morning the current was running muddy and swift.

"The saints are good to us, even if we travel with heretics," José triumphantly declaimed. "By their help we shall avoid even the Comanches. I dreamed last night of Our Lady of Guadalupe—she had a face like the Señorita Rosa, and she smiled."

The Long American stopped at gallop, as we were loading up.

"Buenos días, señorita y señores. And you also, you young buck," he added, at me. "It is well we are not upon the other side of the river; no?"

"It is well, señor. And naturally we are glad to be back into our own country again," replied the old don.

"Comanche country, this, say the Injuns," the Long American laughed. "They respect no flag, señor."

José paused to cross himself.

"Our Lady of Guadalupe is protecting us, señor. I will ask her to include you."

"Thanks; but I've my own medicine here." And

the Long American tapped his rifle. "You may pray to La Señora, amigo, while Don Antonio and Don Ricardo fight the devil."

"A heretic indeed," muttered José, indignant.

"But there are no savages expected, Don Juan?" the señorita anxiously inquired.

"Who may expect them until they are amongst us, señorita? They ride with the devil, as I have just said. Doubtless we shall go through and never sight a braid. We're too well armed." He addressed the don. "I wish to borrow your Americano a moment, señor."

"All that I have is yours."

"I am a man's man and not a woman's, else I'd take you up on that," laughed the Long American. And to me: "Ride along a piece with me, compañero. You need exercise."

So we cantered forward.

"Enough," he bade. "We're out of earshot of that sprig, Antonio. Your party knows nothing about the dead bull, as yet, I reckon?"

"The dead bull? There's been only the one dead bull ——"

"He's more than dead; he's wolf picked, by this time. Served you handsomely, he did, too. But there's another bull, of service. One of the hunters found him, early, on this side the river, just above us. Dead he was, with an Injun arrow sticking in his ribs; but he hadn't been wolf picked. Too fresh for that. The arrow was Comanche feathered, and the blood scarce dried."

"Shall I tell Don Antonio?" And I felt a cold little quiver at the word "Comanche."

"No, or I'd have told him myself. He could no more keep the news than if the Comanche scalp was at his belt. He'd be bragging from here to Santa Fé, for the ears of the señorita. But I want you to sit tight and ready to jump at the first whoop, so you'll not be late into the corral. Get your party and baggage in; then you can use your Sam Hawken."

"But Don Antonio ——?" I stammered. "I can depend on him?"

The Long American nodded.

"Oh, he'll fight. He'll have to. You take care of the girl and the old man and he'll watch out for the trunk, you bet. You'll find Mister Tony sticking as close as the scalp-lock to a drowned Injun. But we're liable not to glimpse a painted face, specially if José keeps praying. So adiós."

"Adiós. Wait—I'd like to know more about that trunk," I appealed.

Whereat he grinned.

"So would I, amigo. And some day we may, you and I."

During this first day out from the Arkansas we moved cautiously; and then, fears having been tossed to the breeze, under the stress of the next dry stage the compact formation weakened into more of open order. Camp-fire talk had agreed that the wounded bull could not have traveled far with the arrow point working in his lungs. We had missed the savages by perhaps a narrow margin, but missed them we had, or

they us; and accustomed to such misses, the teamsters waxed buoyant.

And the Comanches came down upon us in mid-morning, when the sun was very hot and the animals were pulling sluggishly through a long sandy bottom bordered by ridgy bare hills. They likely enough had been dogging us for the day and a quarter.

With shot into the air and wild frenzied signal by upraised arms the advance flankers riding out from the column's head tore homing like gun-shy bird-dogs; and hardly had sound and sight struck the caravan when upon their very tracks the Indians poured from a cleft between two ridges; no, not from one draw but from two—three; and dividing charged front and rear.

"Injuns, boys!"

"Close up! Close up!"

"Gawdalmighty, hurry!"

"From both sides ——!"

"We're gone beaver!"

"Not yet, by thunder!"

"Buck! Spot! Gee! Gee with you!"

"These pesky mules! Wisht I'd knocked 'em in the head back at the Arkansaw."

"Corral, men! On right and left—hurry!"

Captain Stanley and assistants were galloping, ordering, urging; the teamsters were lashing with their whips, shouting curses and implorations; the caballada herders were shrieking for help; the horsemen our guard were holding an undaunted but thin and inward driven line close pressed by a very horde of whooping, gesticulating, triumphantly scurrying savages.

The girl had uttered one little cry, and now sat rigid, smitten mute by horror. So sudden had been the change in the peaceful landscape.

"Los bárbaros!" had spoken the don, with surprising composure. "But by God's help ——" And he waited.

A single gasp had issued from Don Antonio, and he seemed momentarily paralyzed by the apparitions arisen as if from hell. His jaw had dropped.

Upon the spike mule José was now hammering, now holding back ——

"Our Lady and all the saints!" he gabbled. "Save us! We are of the faith. These others are heretics, but not us. Save us, Our Lady, and I will set you up a candle four feet long. I swear it."

The foremost wagon was supposed to turn broadside and halt, with its oxen swung into rear. Alternating, the succeeding wagons should join themselves to it, right and left, to form an oval, their teams inside, until there was only an opening left, at the end, for the caballada.

We had done this in practice; but now in time of need the Old Harry himself actuated the brutes; and what with the yelling and the cursing and the popping of whips, the rearing and cringing and blundering of the confused animals, a pandemonium reigned for ear and eye.

I leaped my mule forward, to assist José. The caballada, with difficulty controlled by the frightened herders, was hemming us behind and upon either side, the great Conestoga immediately before had turned

half across our way, the mules of the next wagon were plunging and balking, and our own team, blocked, were getting restive.

Out upon our flanks the savages never ceased, never relaxed. Galloping and swerving, they were ringing us about with yell and shot and shaken bow and lance, and still more dreadful threat of painted visage. With the corner of my eye I noted that our fringe of fighters were being sorely put to retire in good order upon the caravan; they seemed only to await the forming of the shelter corral.

"A candle four feet long; no, five feet, O Señora!" bargained José. "Drive the devil out of these mules and you shall have it."

"To the right! To the right, José!" I shouted. "Around that wagon!"

He tugged upon the bit and hammered lustily with his heels. Don Antonio also spurred forward—and at the instant a half dozen of the savages came pelting down upon the caballada, waving their robes and screeching, for stampede.

They had found a hole; now the guard dared not fire —emptying their escopetas the herders fled wildly or were swallowed in the rush of the terrified beasts, and at once an avalanche of snorting, plunging, rearing, fear-mad brutes o'erran us.

Don Antonio disappeared; I was shunted aside like a chip; the old don and the señorita cried out together —the carriage was engulfed—and then, ramming frantically again into the hurly-burly, I saw it, beyond, being twitched into the clear by the bolting team. To

the jab of the spurs my mule launched herself obediently after; and away we all raced at headlong speed, out from the jumble of wallowing Conestogas and insensate stock.

The pounding hoofs and far-stretched necks of the caballada stampeders accompanied us, inciting the crazed team. What had become of Don Antonio I did not know—and did not pause to ascertain.

There was no heading us; I was gradually drawing up on the carriage, and had only brief vision of the useless bridle-grabbing by our beset horsemen as we charged through. The savage circle gladly opened to us. A portion of it broke in pursuit.

The carriage team ran free, José hugging fast but helpless. We had left the broad trail; the mules rose and fell over the uneven ground, and amidst the hillocks the carriage jolted fearfully. José's voice, again beseeching all the saints, unreeled adown the breeze; the old don and the señorita sat silent and clinging.

My good mule cut the space short and shorter. Now we were at the rear wheels, now at the carriage step and I might answer the white countenances of the passengers. I briefly glanced backward. About a score of the Comanches were in chase, at rear and upon either side.

The mule lengthened to prick of rowel and shake of rein. We were past the step, we were at the tails of the wheel span, we were creeping up on the spike mule and were almost at José's tightly clasping shanks.

"Señor!" he gasped appealingly.

"You fool!" I shouted. "Haul on the bit—haul!"

He could not, or would not. I reached for the bridle, and ——

"Señor-r-r!" It was a cry from the carriage.

"Señor! The trunk!"

"Dios! The trunk!"

With fingers laced into the spike mule's cheek-strap I twisted in the saddle. The trunk had jolted loose; towed by one thong it was tumbling along in our wake, while the scouring savages yelled in glee.

"No matter," I essayed. Drat the trunk!

"Señor! The trunk!" The señorita had entreated. Veering in, a Comanche was casting for it with his reata. The noose slipped harmlessly across it; and as I dropped bridle to turn for a shot he darted away, laughing, but cowered behind his daubed shield. And I permitted him to go, while I grasped for the bridle again.

"Señor! The trunk!"

I looked. The thong had parted, the trunk was still rolling onward and the old don was half-way over the carriage edge, as if to dive out. Forth he pitched, whether willy-nilly, to land asprawl like a monkey.

With all my strength I reined the spike mule. She whirled so quickly that the wheel span were thrown from their feet, the Dearborn tilted on two wheels, well-nigh was over, the señorita screamed, it righted, we completed the short half circle ——

"After me, José!" I yelled, and forged on in succor of Don Isidro, now scrambling to the trunk.

A Comanche met him; they came together there, the

poor old don threw up protesting arm, and at full speed the fellow lanced him. I saw the blade sink; brandishing blood-tipped shaft the savage swerved in flight. My mule seemed to stop of her own will—only a second, but long enough for the low blade sight of the Hawken to outline against a dingy, tensely bent back; and I pulled trigger. The ball cleaned the saddle. Dragging a writhing, bounding carcass the pony galloped into the desert.

Amid a tremendous outburst of whoops I reached the trunk, with the body of the old don doubled upon it. The lid was askew; and strange to say I marked a sheepskin shirt and a red flannel petticoat, just as the Long American had lightly predicted.

But there was no time to marvel. A few of the Comanches had continued after the caballada animals, and here came the vengeful others, like fiends of the pit. The arrows hissed and pattered. And here came José, vigorously encouraging the spike mule, while the carriage, with the señorita leaning from it, rocked behind.

That next minute was an eternity. Somehow I had reloaded—somehow I was off my mule and standing over the old don crumpled upon the trunk and running red; somehow I was praying to the saints, myself, that the carriage arrive.

They were upon us—the Comanches! I dared not hazard empty piece, and the rifle muzzle only sent them dodging. There was one, close to the carriage. He gained rapidly, extending dirty claw for the head-stall of a mule, and I drew down upon him. The arm of

the señorita, also, extended; it pointed with a great pistol (procured from where I know not); the pistol exploded, and straightening in his seat the savage bore away, swaying, and turned not back.

But another seized the bit of the spike mule; and so near they wrestled that I might hear the grunts. Kill him I must—when José, plucking knife, stabbed him again and again, and he toppled, howling.

The team and carriage were arriving; and suddenly, warned by something unseen, I whirled about. The trunk bristled with arrows, a cast lance whistled over my shoulder, and I looked full into the bended bows of two warriors, their arrows leveled, the one at me, the other at the don.

The Hawken cracked and the bows twanged together; the lead caught the one rascal just as he released, and the arrow only grazed the don; simultaneously a fiery pain shocked all my shoulder, as the other arrow landed true. José uttered a Spanish oath; and as the Comanche who had struck me rushed forward to the finish, the peón's flung knife thudded into his broad, sweat-glistening chest.

Then I had tumultuous dream of another commotion—of the señorita screaming tigerish, of José swearing and dragging at the don, of myself flailing with rifle-barrel, beating aside lance and bow stroke and thrust of knife—of stinking painted forms careering, hooting, fighting to keep us from the carriage—of mules rearing and biting—and of a hearty cheer which instantly resolved chaos into order as rescue from the caravan tore in.

Down I was sitting, exhausted. The face of the Long American I recognized the first; and next, that of Don Antonio, bending over the señorita and Don Isidro.

"Dios! If I might only have got here sooner," he was saying. "You! The trunk! Dios! Had I been here, myself! But the caballada trampled me under hoof."

José was blubbering and wringing his hands.

"You're all right, son," was speaking the Long American, to me. "We'll quit you of this arrow"—and he did, by snapping the shaft and drawing it through—"and put a hunk o' tobacco on. 'Tisn't pizened, Lord be thanked."

"How's Don Isidro?" I managed.

"Quién sabe—who knows?"

But ——

"The don wants the Señor Americano." That was the announcement. I stiffly moved over to him, where now he sat supported by José.

He gave me his withered hand. It was as cold as ice.

"Mi hija—my daughter," he breathed. "If I am called, guard mi señorita hija. You are brave—an American and a heretic, but brave. Take all, but guard mi hija."

"I will guard her as more than my life, señor," I promised. "I ask nothing."

"No! Por Dios!" Don Antonio spoke quickly. "She shall be mine to guard, Señor Don Isidro. I am her primo ——"

"Not my first cousin; only my segundo, mi Antonio," she corrected, just as quickly.

"It is my right, nevertheless."

"No matter," sighed the old don, wearily. "Guard her, one or both. I look to the American; he has twice proved himself. Á Dios, my children. María santísima ——" and he was gone.

Yet not so. The Long American put fingers upon his wrist, and ordered in English and Spanish mingled.

"Fainted. Hoist him into the carriage, boys. In with you, señorita. He may go under, he may not—quién sabe? But we won't leave his scalp for those Comanche hounds. Get on your mule, José. He's not dead, I say, but he will be if we wait. Into the carriage with you, lad ——"

I shook my head.

"I can ride the saddle," said I; and added: "If Don Antonio will escort at one side I'll take care of the other."

"I am here," Antonio announced.

"You are indeed muy hombre, señor," José conceded, to me. "God will repay you for what you have done." It was the cant phrase used by beggars who receive alms.

He paused only to wrest his knife from the chest of the dead savage, tear off the scalp, and bestow upon the corpse a contemptuous kick. He mounted the spike mule.

"Forward!" the Long American prompted. "Those imps have their bellies full; but if we need to fight in, we will."

"The trunk!" exclaimed Antonio. "Wait! The trunk!"

Sure enough, the trunk.

"Oh, santo Dios!" José muttered; and tumbling off he picked it up, with its lid half open and the two garments trailing. Otherwise it was empty, as we all, gazing curiously, might see.

"A heap of pother about such scurvy baggage," drawled a man at my elbow. "And somebody said it contained a gold mine!"

"Come on, come on, or there'll be hair missing yet!" the Long American bade, impatient, while with Don Antonio's assistance José again secured the trunk. "Next thing we know, the whole Comanche nation will be atop us."

At last we started, the carriage in our midst, Don Antonio and I riding at the panels, the savages keeping safe distance from the flanking horsemen. The old don rested, without flutter of life, against the señorita. She stroked his bare head, thinly thatched with gray. She leaned to speak across to me.

"You are wounded, Don Ricardo; but except for you we all should have been dead. You saved José and me, and you saved my father's body if not his life. God will surely repay you."

"I did only what any man would do, señorita," said I. "I desire no pay." With that I had lied. But I would claim no pay.

"That cursed caballada!" Don Antonio deplored. "I was knocked down, trampled under. I came as quickly as I could to your rescue, Rosa, but I have

offended the saints. I was late. El Señor Americano has the luck. If the Comanches should attack now, then should you see how a caballero Mexicano can fight. I am of the sangre azul—the noble blood, of the conquistadores from Spain, Señor Don Ricardo," he proudly informed me. "My ancestors bore the cross and the sword to these heathen."

"Oh, I hope there will be no more fighting!" she faltered. "Madre de Dios, I hope not!"

Don Isidro aroused to the jolting of the carriage. He faintly murmured:

"The trunk. My trunk."

"It is safe, my father. It is with us."

"As before?"

"All safe, my father."

He sighed and relapsed.

The Comanches did not molest us; the turmoil at the caravan had died away. Content with the major portion of the caballada, the savages shook their bows and lances at us, and with a parting yell made for the hills, herding the stock before them. When we arrived at the caravan all was peace.

We had lost one herder and one hundred mules, horses and beef cattle, and had exacted reprisal to the count of at least half a dozen warriors. But the Comanches left no bodies save that transfixed by José's knife, near the trunk, so that there was disappointment among the rougher of the teamsters and mountain-men whose idea of victory materialized in a patch of bloody hair. Old José, composedly wearing his trophy tucked into his belt, was the real hero—much to my relief.

We did not, however, lose Don Isidro. He had a marvelous amount of vitality housed in his scant frame. His wound was rudely dressed—the lance had passed only through flesh (such as there was) where a rib had turned the blade aside; he revived during the space of time while the caravan was being reorganized; and when we pulled on he was reclining back in the carriage, ghastly pallid but conscious.

My own wound, plugged with a compress of tobacco and buffalo wool, proved trivial. In five days I was able to level my rifle without discomfort, so potent I found the impromptu alleviative, aided by the fresh air and the daily rations of strong meat.

We crossed the desert of the Cimarron and approached the more rolling brushy country which should usher us into Santa Fé. The trail consistently waxed plainer, until at the end of the second week it had become a fairly well-traveled road, winding among high hills and fording clear deeply-bedded streams, but still gaunt of human habitation.

CHAPTER VII

I AM DISMISSED FROM SERVICE

"SANTY FEE to-morrow, boys! Hooray for Santy Fee!"

"To-morrow night we'll be shaking our feet with those black-eyed gals. Whoopee!"

"And if I find my little Paquita has been cottonin' to 'ary durned strutty caballero, thar'll be loose ha'r to pay, you bet!" boasted somebody who had been to end o' trail before.

We had passed the first settlement, named San Miguel: a curious, and, to me, a mean collection of box-like mud huts, around a square, and altogether shamed by the lovely valley in which they were squatted. The swarthy villagers reaped a goodly harvest by the sale of goats' milk and curds.

"It is only a settlement of country folk," explained Don Isidro, to me. "In Santa Fé you will see a true ciudad (city) of the gente fina."

We passed an ancient Indian town, named Pecos, where a few tame Indians and Mexicans were living near a ruined chapel. That night we made camp within striking distance of Santa Fé, which lay, I learned, to the northwest, across a high plateau, under the guardianship of the snow peaks shimmering whitely, in the same direction.

Captain Stanley, the Long American and a squad of others had ridden on to inquire into the market for the goods, and to prepare for our reception. This evening all was bustle and excitement around the fires; men were shaving and cutting one another's hair, even scraping the mud from their wagons and cleaning the harnesses—much as if for a Sunday trip into town, in the States.

"Slick up, young feller," was their advice, as I gazed amused. "Slick up, or you won't shine amongst them gals at Santy Fee."

But my heart being not at Santa Fé, as yet, I might only laugh; and especially as I had naught with which to "slick up." In truth, what with my dusty, stained clothing, my seven weeks' stubble, my generally weather-worn, ragged appearance, I was quite aware that I should not "shine."

At our own fire Don Antonio laughed softly. He nodded in the direction of the loud-talking men.

"The fools," he asserted. "They think that the señoritas will be all eyes and hearts for the Americanos. It is but a fancy of the moment; when the Americanos go they leave only their money and are forgotten. No Señorita Mexicana bestows her heart upon a heretic. It is all play; a little fiesta; nada entre dos platos—a fuss about nothing. And afterward—hah! The caballero stays; the Americano is no more."

And he spoke with such covert meaning, in a side fling as for my benefit, that his flat dictum hurt.

Señorita Rosa answered gently.

"My father and I will not forget one señor Ameri-

cano. He shall be remembered in our prayers, Antonio."

"And God will reward him," old José reiterated.

We all broke camp late. There seemed a deal of preparation still. The mules and oxen had to be rubbed sleek with brush and straw; the men had to don clean shirts and gaudy neckerchiefs, and grease their boots. The teamsters had to tie fresh crackers to their whips, replacing the frayed buckskin; and soon the camp resounded with the loud popping of the new snappers.

Only our party had not joined in the festal overhauling; and as to the final cries of "Stretch out! Stretch out!" we moved on with the long line, we presented rather a shabby appearance: the dusty carriage with the dilapidated trunk, the patched rusty harness, old José astride one unkempt mule, Don Isidro, bleak and shriveled underneath his soiled blanket, the señorita in her sober black, Don Antonio in garb now dulled and with sharp face sparsely bearded, and I a veritable backwoodsman—shirt shoulder matted muddy red.

Nevertheless, the señorita alone glorified us. No sombre setting might quench the beauty of her eyes.

We proceeded briskly. The sandy road undulated through deep dry washes, and up again, and down. The snow peaks before gradually lifted. The hill slopes and the flats were covered with low cedar and dwarf pine. This country of New Mexico was strangely monotonous, yet strangely fascinating; one

was constantly gazing into vast, inviting spaces, containing nobody knew what.

About noon we commenced to toil up a long rise, frequently cut by the paths of the mountain freshets which had coursed through the gravelly soil. The dust floated chokingly. Don Isidro leaned forward, to speak to me.

"On top the mesa, Don Ricardo; then across it, and we shall sight Santa Fé. Quiera Dios—may God grant! I am nearing home, and I am very tired."

The foremost of the wagons was disappearing, upon the mesa. In due time our own carriage topped the last rise. A level plain of the cedars and pinyons spread before. To the west there were bluish mountains, huge and mysterious. To the east there were high brushy hills, extending north until they terminated in the snow crests; and in the direction toward which we trended there seemed to be a tinge of wood smoke, exhaled maybe from a valley.

The señorita pointed, her eyes sparkling.

"Santa Fé! You see it, Don Ricardo?"

I could see no city, but the advance horsemen evidently could, for a great shouting drifted back to us and riders and teamsters were swinging their hats.

Rood by rood we advanced, in the wake of the caravan which became ever more excited. The valley was unfolding; we passed a mud hut from whose doorway shawled women and black-eyed little children stared, motionless. The leading wagons were dipping down again, at the other edge of the mesa; and in the

eastern or upper end of the valley I glimpsed isolated fields of corn stubble.

The valley opened farther—the shouts and the popping of whips were increasing. We passed the next hut; Don Antonio swung his own hat joyously.

"Santa Fé! The city of Santa Fé! There it is, mi amigo! There it is, Rosa mía! Viva Santa Fé!"

"Where, señor?" I pleaded, peering from the saddle.

"Your eyes are looking upon it, my son," old Don Isidro informed.

"Is it not beautiful?" inquired the señorita, with a sigh.

"Sí! Un ciudad muy grande," declared José.

The valley was opened full and broad, running down from the snowy range to the northeast, between our mesa and another far across. But city? I saw indeed a scattering of the same low, square-cornered, one-story mud huts about the size of brick kilns; I saw the cupolas of a church; and I saw that which might be orchards and corn fields; but as respecting anything "muy grande" or beautiful (save for the setting), why, the meanest block in Cincinnati or St. Louis would have scorned the whole assemblage.

We descended from the mesa by a continuation of the trail which speedily took on the features of a narrow street bordered by the mud boxes. We crossed a wide water ditch where women at laundry work straightened to smile and along which pattered a file of near naked children, screaming welcome. A hundred dogs barked.

Our entry seemed to have taken the town by the ears.

"Los Americanos!"

"Viva! Los carros!—Hurrah! The wagons!"

"Vengan! Mira! La entrada de la caravana!—Come! See! The caravan arrives!"

Such a hubbub—such a running and shrieking, shouting and lash-cracking! Our horsemen capered and waved their hats; our teamsters popped valorously and leveled bluff sallies right and left; even the wagon animals enthused, and pricking their ears, tugged bravely.

Accompanied by a foot cavalcade we proceeded, our wagons towering higher than the houses, on down the crooked street hedged by the mud walls and wooden-shuttered, iron-barred windows, until the way opened into a public square or plaza.

The crowd of townspeople had thickened. While the wagons were being arraigned at the customs warehouse—a tedious job—the carriage stood halted at a cross-street. As I sat suddenly homesick and forlorn amidst the strangeness of the sights and sounds Don Isidro spoke to me.

"We leave you, muy mío (my dear friend), to go to our house. I am tired. With your permission, then—and when I am rested I will ask the favor of your presence in my poor establishment. José will find you. All that I have is yours. Vaya con Dios."

"Á Dios, Don Ricardo," bade the señorita; and she extended her hand.

I doffed my hat and accepted.

"I, too, shall look to see you in our house," she said. "My father would call you son, and to me you are brother. A Dios, till later."

"Adiós, señorita," I answered; and her hand, I thought, lingered just an instant before it was quickly withdrawn. She gathered her shawl over her head and sank back.

Don Antonio had ridden a few paces to exchange words with another caballero.

"Á casa, José," ordered the old don; and as José kicked his mule in the ribs Don Antonio hastily spurred to clear passage through the gaping rabble. He turned his horse hither and thither; the carriage trundled after, importuned by beggars.

"Hasta que llegue la hora—until the hour, Americano," he shouted back, with meaning which somewhat puzzled me.

I was left in a small space compressed about by the staring populace: closely shawled old women; scarf-covered young women, their faces crimsoned with a sort of ruddy stain or plastered with white; large-hatted, fancy-blanketed men eternally rolling their corn-husk cigarritos; big-eyed little boys and girls, and all the leprous, lame and blind of Mexico, as would appear.

"He is a bravo."

"He has been wounded."

"See the blood on his shoulder."

A beggar hobbled to me.

"Alms, señor. Help the poor and God will reward you."

But as I had not a cent, at the shake of my head he lingered near, to curse me for a heathen.

To my vast relief, since I did not know exactly what to do nor whither to go, the Long American came at a trot down the waiting line, and hailed me jovially.

"Qué hay? What's the matter? I've been seeking you. Caramba, but you look as glum as an old bach. beaver! The don has quit you, eh?"

"Yes. He said he was going to his house."

"Discharged, are you?"

"After a fashion. He said he'd send for me later."

"And so he will: send for you, pay you, what-not? He's a man of his word. You've won his liking, or I'm a poor guesser. Yes, and won something else, in another quarter—whether for good or ill I don't say."

"How so?"

"I shot center, on the petticoat and the sheepskin shirt, didn't I? Bueno! Only a guess, too. Well, the shirt's nothing to shine with—cuss the luck! But there may be something worth while in the petticoat, if it fits. Come along. Slick up. By the looks of the girls' faces there's a big baile to-night; at the fonda, I hear tell; and unless you change your hide you'll stand about as much show with the señoritas as a one-armed man at a dog-feast."

I followed him; we emerged at the plaza, and turning into the street fronting it on the south, we threaded passage amidst the idlers crossing back and forth or standing in knots. As fast as they discharged at the customs warehouse the wagons drove through the

plaza, to the tune of the incessant whip-popping, and corraled as directed by Captain Stanley.

At the next corner we tied our mounts to a pole hitching-rail on the plaza edge, and I gladly stretched my legs.

"You're to have a shirt and other trappings," declared the Long American. "And then you're to scrape your face. I'd as soon pull my own bristles out with bone tweezers as go under the knife of El Señor Barber, here. But in your present rig you're a regular white Injun and no caballero. You have money coming to you. Yon's the American store, and I have credit coming to me there. Bueno! But first for the fonda, to wash the dust from our throats."

Nothing loth, I trod at his heels. The fonda, as it was styled, proved to be the great mud-walled inn only a dozen steps onward, across the alley-like street which here entered the corner of the plaza. The inn building itself was an enclosure of the high walls that formed a corral half an acre in extent; and once inside we were enmeshed by a scene of utmost confusion.

The floor seemed to be occupied chiefly by gaming tables and a bar, and a patronage of all colors and description: our own flannel-shirted, booted teamsters and buckskin hunters jostling elbows with their fellows drawn from the trader and beaver trail, and with Mexicans, Indians, breeds, who may say? Flannels, leather, serapes, blankets, crowded and shifted, pressed against the bar or grouped at the tables. The uproar of voices in many languages sounded as a babel.

We pushed through to the bar, and cut the dust from

our throats with "Taos lightning"—a whiskey so raw and fiery that it made me gag. While we stood, surveying, I felt a hand upon my shoulder, and faced young Don Antonio. He was flushed with drink, and blatantly noisy.

"El Americano—carajo!" he gabbled, swaying. "I find you. We are well met. Here; you are paid." And he thrust at me a leathern bag in which coins jingled. "Four reales a day. They are sent by Don Isidro. You may count them, or take the word of a caballero. You are paid off, Americano. Sí. With this bag I pay you. Now I do not say 'Á Dios'; it is to the devil with you, and all Americans. You brought me nothing but ill luck on the trail, but here I am in my own country."

"Did Don Isidro send me no other word?" I asked.

"Don Isidro? A don of the sangre azul send word to an American heretic? To a beggar whom he took into his service out of pity and has enriched?". And Antonio laughed. "No. You were hired, you are paid, there is nothing more. He was sick and weak and of a soft heart; but he shall have good care without strange hands. To the devil with you, Señor Americano."

"And to your drinks with you, Señor Big Talk," I angrily retorted; and I emptied the sack upon the bar. The silver pieces rolled and slithered and jingled upon the floor. "Here is enough to drown your jealousy, Señor Jackanapes. And I will see the don for myself. I do not want his money."

Beggars dived for the coins; there was a hustling

and a crowding. Antonio flashed a knife—the Long American hurled me backward as I clubbed my rifle, he sprang between us, and ready hands dragged the young don, mouthing many oaths and struggling furiously, away through the mob.

"By your leave," said the Long American, as he swept the coins from the bar into the sack again.

"I do not want them," I raged.

"No; but somebody may," he coolly replied. "They're current yonder." And he nodded toward the gaming tables. "I'll try a play or two."

"Do as you please," I said, still choking. "It is all yours, anyway."

He strolled across the room, I stalking after. Then I observed that the largest and most popular gaming table was presided over by a woman as dealer.

The crowd here parted before the masterful entrance of the Long American. The woman casually glanced up. She was extravagantly powdered—a woman of Spanish extraction, I should say—and richly attired in black, low cut. Aside from a certain hardness of features she was not ill looking. She smiled as she delayed the game a moment.

"What? El Señor Americano Largo, again?"

"Assuredly, señora," he answered. "Why not? Do not we all come back?"

Her bold black eyes fell upon me.

"But they do not always do me the credit of bringing a friend with them. It speaks well for the honesty of my game, señor."

"He is my luck," laughed the Long American. "I

present to you the señor, Don Ricardo Andrews, Señora Barceló. He has made the trip across—has eaten his buffalo meat and killed his Indian, and is a muy hombre, my compañero."

She scanned me, with exhibit not only of her bold eyes but of her magnificent teeth; and I thrilled to the dangerous allurement as of a purring tigress.

"An Americano, young, handsome, already muy hombre and your comrade. The combination sits him well." Her face softened. "It is a long trail to Santa Fé, young señor. If you have a mother, go back to her. You are from Missouri?"

"Ohio, señora."

"Ohio," she murmured. "Yes. That is a long, long way. But no matter." Her manner abruptly changed to business. "You would adventure further, caballeros? I am about to throw the cards."

"I always play the red and the queen, señora," laughed the Long American. "I call the queen of hearts." He planked down his sack.

The game was what is termed monte—played with American cards in a Spanish deck. It was simple. The table had been divided into four squares to which the cards were apportioned as dealt, with the gamblers staking upon the fall of suit or face. She smiled.

"Así es—as you say." And we all bided to watch the deal.

The queen of hearts! I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw it fall to the square upon which rested the bag of coin.

"Caramba!"

"'Stá bueno!"

"El Americano wins!"

The applause was generous, for the Long American appeared to be a favorite. There were other winners, and there were losers, as the deal continued. The señora gathered some of the coins from the table, added to some—she scrutinized me with strange seriousness.

"The queen of hearts, young señor. You called her. No?"

"Por Dios, I called her myself," reproved the Long American.

The señora smiled as she counted the contents of the sack.

"You? Do you think the queen of hearts comes to your call, you with the turkey neck? You have a squaw in every Indian village, I'll wager. The young señor wins ——" and she shot me a sudden glance as she shoved the money to him.

"Adiós, then," he replied. "We are done. There is only one queen of hearts, for young men; I prefer a queen of diamonds myself." He bowed, with a grin. "To another time, señora."

"To another time, señores."

"Suppose we get a bit of fresh air," he proposed to me; and we went out.

"Who is she?" I queried, nonplussed by the covert intent of her words.

"She? The señora? They used to call her La Tules. She was half American, now she's all Spanish and known as the Señora Doña Gertrudis Barceló—

the cleverest she-gambler in the province and the richest woman west of St. Louis."

"Married?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Quién sabe, compañero? Nobody asks. But since the turn in her luck that boosted her to open a monte bank of her own she's all the fashion. There's none too pious to lay a stake on the table of Doña Gertrudis. She pays well for her privileges, gives liberally, and that's enough."

He tossed a dollar to a whining beggar, who clutched it and assured us that God would reward.

"I've quarters in mind for us at the casa of an old dame I know," he remarked. "That'll be quieter than at the fonda and warmer than a blanket in the plaza or under a wagon. But first you'll make your purchases and get some plunder so you can slick up. With a fresh shirt and other trappings and a turn at my razor you'll be fit to call the queen of hearts from the baile deck, to-night. But a señorita would as soon smile upon an Injun as upon you in your present guise."

"And I'd as soon dance with a squaw as with those painted faces, such as I've seen here in Santa Fé," said I.

"Oh, pshaw! 'Tis a complexion preservative. To-night you'll see every face as clean as new buckskin. And she'll be there, too."

"Who?"

"La señorita." And his eyes twinkled. "Hi! Now will you spruce up?"

"I want no trappings—or if I did, I cannot buy them," I replied glumly.

"You can and you will. The card paid me double; the original stake is yours and you stand me even. So hold your gab, lad. In truth, I believe I'm going to be your debtor before we leave the ciudad."

In the general store across the way from the fonda I was speedily served by a young Mexican clerk who spoke excellent English. We remounted our animals; the Long American led me by a short cut from the plaza to a low house just off the caravan trail through town, with a rickety wood-pillared porch facing upon the so-called Santa Fé River—a stream-bed bordered by willows and poplars, but containing little water. A shriveled old woman received us with few words, supplemented by a ready toothless smile. We were ushered into an earthen floored and earthen walled room, lighted by a barred window encased at least three feet thick.

Here I changed my clothing for the new gray-flannel shirt and crimson neckerchief; scraped my chin and cheeks with the razor produced from amongst my friend's "possibles"; washed in the baked-clay basin of water from the river; and lacking any such matter as a mirror must take his word for it that now I was "fit."

Leaving our animals picketed in the river-bottom in front of the house, and our rifles and blankets in care of the ancient señora, we sallied forth to inspect the town, which appeared to withhold no secrets from my guide.

The arrival of the caravan evidently had awakened it to spasmodic life, as if we had been a nine-days' wonder. The bare plaza was still rife with the villagers, whose ranks ran the gamut from the nonchalant well-to-do who seemed to have put all their wealth upon self and horse, to the complaining wretchedness of the repulsive cripples. Occasionally through the folds of a shawl I caught glimpses of a face of real beauty but none that, to my fancy, equaled in piquant charms the face of the señorita. There were a number of young caballeros, showily astride, the counterparts of Antonio. There were many Josés, a sprinkling of cheaply uniformed soldiers and two or three dapper slim-waisted officers—these from the barracks and the military headquarters on the west of the plaza. The sole figure for whom all made way, with touch of hat and murmured obsequiousness, was that of a portly priest in black gown and three-cornered chapeau.

The town of course centered at the plaza—a square of hard-baked ground treeless and shadeless, with several of our Conestogas parked in it, small donkeys standing patiently, laden with fagots and market panniers, and horsemen at full canter racing back and forth regardless of pedestrians. The public buildings, including a church, faced upon it; together with stores, a huckster market, and the teeming fonda. Thence the mud-box dwellings stretched away in broken order, forming haphazard streets or lanes like cow-trails. Not a few of the casas were attached, by high mud walls, to large yards containing fruit trees and gardens, and entered by heavy wooden doors; and as consider-

able of the ground right in the town was devoted to corn and such stuff, the place somewhat resembled an extensive farm.

All in all, it was rather lack-luster, being of a flatness and a monotony relieved only by festoons of bright red peppers hanging upon the singularly one-patterned houses, by the gay costumes of the caballeros, and by the white-crowned mountains immediately to the east.

The building of most interest was a long, heavily porticoed, flat-roofed structure, whose row of rooms like cells occupied practically the whole north side of the plaza. This was El Palacio—the legislative and executive quarters of the province. It was reputed to have been built for some two hundred years. And while the interior was closed to us, the Long American took pains to show me a number of dried Indian ears strung upon cords within the portico.

"That's how they count coup—these Mexicanos," he explained. "When they kill a 'Pache or Comanche they fetch in his ears, and get reward."

Save for rioting, bawling teamsters and their hunter and trapper mates upon whom the "Taos lightning" whiskey from the fonda bar had worked its worst, the town was quieted down as we wended back, in the wane of the afternoon, for supper at the old señora's. Suddenly I sighted Don Antonio, at one side in the plaza. He was spurring a sweat-reeked horse, at the same time reining him short—and the cruelty enraged me. Then the large bell of the plaza church pealed vespers. Instantly every native stopped movement;

the women bowed, the men uncovered, Don Antonio, I observed, checked his horse statuesque, his head bared, even our Americans halted, to stare voiceless and wondering; and excepting the boom of the bell and the mutter of prayers, there was cessation of life as though by enchantment.

The vespers broke into a merry chime of several bells together. At once everybody straightened up and amidst exchanges of "Buenas tardes (Good evening)!" resumed where he had left off. Don Antonio galloped furiously away.

"That done, next for the baile," grumbled the Long American. "But a thief with one hand in your pocket would stop and cross himself with the other, at sound of that bell. They have easy consciences, down here, these people."

The genuine hospitality of the old crone at the house by the river made that spot a veritable oasis. I suspect that our dole for the board and lodging was a Godsend to her.

"To the great baile this night, señores?" she queried, pottering to serve us, sitting cross-legged upon the floor, with chocolate, tortillas, beans stewed in red peppers, all cooked in her corner fireplace.

"Naturalmente, señora. And where is it?" answered my friend.

"At the fonda, señor. They will have cleared the comedor (dining-room), and it will be a grand affair. Nombre de Dios! Were I young again, like this young señor—ah, he and I would make them all jealous."

"The caballeros would be jealous of me, señora," I civilly asserted.

"There's life in your old legs yet, I'll wager," added the Long American. "Come; we'll leave the young señor to the señoritas and you and I will cut a caper together."

"No, no! God forbid," she protested; but the badinage pleased her.

In the midst of it she uttered sudden exclamation, as if more recent memory had jogged her, and extracted a note from the bosom of her chemise.

"For you," she said to me.

So I unfolded it. It was in good English script.

"YOUNG SEÑOR:

"Should you again play for the queen of hearts at the fonda to-night, watch out that the knave is not slipped you instead. And be prepared.

"OHIO."

"Ohio?" I mused, taken aback, and passed the note to the Long American.

He read.

"'Ohio,'" he muttered. "Sí. 'Stá bueno. You can remember this?" He tossed the note into the fireplace. "Such matters are better câched for keeps," he remarked.

"But 'Ohio,'" I repeated. "Surely I can remember, if necessary; but what is the purpose in remembering this nonsense?"

"Nonsense? The sign is as plain as a buffalo trail. There is only one person hereabouts who pricked ears

at the word 'Ohio.' There is only one queen of hearts for you—and there is the one dark knave who attends her in the pack."

"But what and how does that 'Ohio' know?" I demanded.

"Wits loosen up in the fonda, my boy, and there's little hid from the gaming table. The dealer who doesn't read eyes and lips goes under in short order. I don't know why the doña has taken a fancy to you—maybe because you're young and from the States; but you're in luck. She holds more secrets than the priest. She's smarter'n a beaver, that woman. She can put two and two together quicker'n an Injun on the trail. Now, shall we go to the baile?"

"By all means," said I. "The note makes no difference."

"Except that you'd best go prepared, in case of a row. You can stick my pistol inside your shirt."

"But you?"

He laughed easily.

"I've always found a knife handy in close quarters, and my old gizzard-tickler has served me before."

CHAPTER VIII

I DANCE AT THE BAILE

THE baile hour had been set at eight o'clock. Early though that was, when attired in our bravest the Long American and I proceeded for the fonda the whole town seemed to be streaming there also.

The dim unlighted streets through which we trudged were eerily alive with the flitting forms of murmurous, closely enwrapped women and with now and then a clattering horseman; while from the plaza a like gathering inflowed for that one illuminated spot—the massive fonda. Music and high-pitched clamor issued from the open door and windows. Presently we elbowed inside.

The scene at the bar was more uproarious than ever; the gaming tables had been supplemented by other tables, and stools placed as if for refreshments. In the comedor, or sala de comer (as it was known indifferently), beyond, the musicians were tuning their instruments.

A group of the caballeros, in their gay short jackets, slashed pantaloons, broad sashes, silver-embossed hats upon head and cigarettes between lips, were peering in through the connecting doorway. We pushed on, accompanied by sundry scowls and muttered comments of no friendly bearing.

The eating hall, of flinty smooth clay floor, and hewed posts supporting the beamed ceiling across which muslin had been stretched, in lieu of plaster, was bare of furnishings save a row of chairs and benches lined against the wall, and a little platform, at one end, whereon sat the musicians—three, comprising two fiddles and a guitar.

Already the women were expectantly occupying the chairs. A vastly more attractive sight they proffered than when observed upon the streets. Every face was clean of the offensive red stain and the whitewash; the costumes were gorgeous—red, yellow, bright blue, magenta, in scarf and daring waist, and short skirt revealing handsome ankles and tiny slippered feet. While all the kaleidoscopic effect was enhanced by the black of the chaperons—duennas, in the parlance: the old women watchfully interposed by the side of their charges.

There was a sprinkling of men, mainly Americans, standing awkwardly; the booted teamsters and moccasined trappers and hunters much in evidence as they laughed boisterously at the antics of a wooden-stumped mountaineer with long iron-gray hair and very red face, who pirouetted grotesquely for their amusement. Leaning gracefully against the walls a few stripling natives smoked, and gazed with languid contempt. The room was hazy with the cigarette fumes, welling from the lips of men and women alike.

Something occult summoned my eyes, and I saw the Doña Gertrudis staring fixedly at me. It was she, a salient figure in daring scarlet, sitting by herself and

so as to command the doors. She emanated an element of the handsomely feminine—and a stronger element of the purposeful and self-contained.

As my gaze crossed hers she becked with scarcely perceptible nod—but on the instant the musicians struck up a lively air and the floor trembled to the rush of men seeking partners.

The Long American nudged me.

"Grab a gal," he rapped out, and bolted with the rest. In a twinkling I was left confined to the doorway and to watching the dancers whirl by.

Caballero and señorita and señora glided with the very poetry of motion—the enormous hats of the men spreading above the ebon, piled-up hair of the women, and their cigarettes, as seemed to me, in dangerous proximity. The teamsters were bears, in comparison. While several of the mountain-men were light on their feet they did not, as my friend would have said, "shine."

Altogether, it was the strangest ball that I ever had seen, where beauty paid favor to the beast. The dust and the smoke of the cigarritos made the quivering candles dim.

On a sudden I glimpsed the señorita in the arms of Don Antonio. She was all in black, but with a crimson flower embedded in her luxuriant glossy hair; he wore a yellow velvet jacket, a cherry-colored sash, and light-blue pantaloons slashed with the same yellow. His hat glinted with filigree. Assuredly they formed a vivid spectacle, from which I, in my linsey-woolsey,

my coarse flannel shirt and scuffed boots, must stand back.

Yes, they were indeed the finest couple upon the floor. I granted them that mental tribute, and tried to avert my eyes as they slowly passed, for I would not give the don the triumphant satisfaction of my notice, nor intrude myself upon her. I had been requited for my services by the money wage, and dismissed.

So I did not know whether or not they espied me. Then came the Doña Gertrudis, miserable (I fancied) in the clutch of a huge whiskered American whose boots constantly threatened her small feet. Her face fronted me—her brows lifted significant—she was whirled about; and as my eyes curiously followed her she faced me again, to level a look at once warning and invoking, over the flanneled shoulder of her partner. Thereupon she was lost to me in the maze of whirling couples.

I had mind to retire and sit by myself until I might go to bed (for a poignant distaste of all the alien gaiety possessed me), when the music abruptly ceased in a shrill flourish and there was another rush, this time to my doorway. Many of the cavaliers had seated their ladies and were hastening as if to get refreshment for them; other couples jostled through to the tables. So I must wait aside, in patience.

I sighted Don Antonio's yellow jacket in the current; and next he was directly before me and speaking.

"Buenas noches, amigo. You are not dancing?"

"No, señor. I am a poor dancer, but I enjoy looking on."

"That is good. The floor is full enough of bears and buffalo. There will be sore feet in Santa Fé, to-morrow." His face darkened, and he continued stiffly, although politely. "I ask your pardon, señor, for the little scene this afternoon. When liquor is in one's head, good sense goes out; and that Taos lightning is muy fuerte—very strong. Dios! We were friends on the trail; I wish to be a caballero still, in my own country. Shall we forget this afternoon? I lay my apologies at your feet."

"It is forgotten, Señor Don Antonio," I answered, matching lie with lie. "I would inquire for Don Isidro. Is he recovering?"

"Don Isidoro is well. Gracias."

"And the señorita?" I ventured—determined to test him, determined to enforce my privilege of courtesy, and moreover hoping—hoping ——

He smiled, with smile indulgent, wise and maddening.

"The Señorita Rosa is well, as you have seen; well, and very happy, here in her Santa Fé. Ah, our Mexican women, señor! Strong amidst perils, angels in the home, very loyal to their blood, yet so full of pity for distress and charitable toward all, even the stranger. Sabe Dios! Will you drink with me, señor mío, to the blessed women of New Mexico?"

"I am not drinking to-night, thank you," I responded. "As you say, that Taos lightning is very strong, and I shall need all my wits for the Missouri trail." Shame be upon me, but his covert allusion, his

confidence in her attitude, momentarily dashed me with a sinking of the stomach.

I thought that he sharpened.

"You will be leaving soon?"

"Certainly. This is not my country. I hope to join the first company back, or I shall go alone."

"Á Dios, then," he bade, with more cordiality.

"Á Dios."

And he continued on.

The Long American hove near, upon his arm a flashy Spanish matron as broad as he was tall.

"Hey, compañero! Get into the game," he hailed, over the heads of the others. "Here's a gal for you."

But I might only smile response, out of bile infused into me by the o'er-civil Antonio. I had inquired after Don Isidro and I had inquired after the señorita; and I realized that neither the old don nor the señorita had sent me any word. Now I cursed myself for having made any inquiry whatsoever. I had been hired to a duty; I had performed the duty and had been paid; the whole affair was ended—and perhaps well ended. They might go to the deuce, and if I chose I would go likewise, by my own trail.

Both rooms were a hubbub, as in the one the couples thronged at the tables, sipping liquors and smoking, and as through the other the various caballeros hastened, with step swift or clumpish, as the case might be, bearing glasses to the occupied benches along the wall.

In my quick glance the Señorita Rosa appeared to be

merely tasting of a heavy, oily liquid (a syrup, I judge), and as she returned the glass to Antonio he bowed and extravagantly drained it. With his spark he lighted her cigarette for her. I noted old José sitting humbly by, as her body servant.

I was about to light a cigarette, myself, in bravado, and saunter away, when the Long American found me.

"You stand glowering like a wounded buffalo," he accused. "Come. Ohio wants to see you."

"Ohio?" I queried stupidly.

"Yes. I'll point her out."

The Doña Gertrudis was at one of the tables, rather abstractedly smoking, a glass of whiskey half emptied before her.

She smiled, as I bowed in front of her. The mountain-man, her companion, noisily arose, to make me room.

"You're next, young feller," he remarked. "Dang, I got to stretch my legs. I kin whoop 'round a fire with the best of 'em, but in that thar kind o' stampedo I'm like a beaver without a tail."

The doña motioned to me to be seated.

"Are you going to ask me to dance?" she invited, in English.

"I ask you now, señora," I replied. "But I am not accustomed to dancing in boots, except at a barn-raising—in Ohio."

"Oh!" She lifted her fine brows, and eyed me openly. "They still raise barns—on the Ohio? It was a long time ago that I heard about it. They raise brave young men—and good women, too, there; so I

understand. Do you prefer the women of the Ohio to those of New Mexico, señor—young señor?"

"I would not say. I know little about the New Mexican women. You speak English, señora; do you write it?"

"I rarely do either, but I have a gift with languages spoken and unspoken. I read them all—the language of the lips, the eyes, the heart. It is quite necessary to my profession, where I must put my wits against all wits."

"What have you to tell me, señora?" I demanded, tired of this sparring.

At that moment the music again struck up. With clatter of stools the tables were vacated instantly. We stood; the doña listened a moment.

"'Tis the cuna," she said. "You do not know that, maybe?"

"And what is that—the cuna?" I questioned.

"It is a Spanish figure, similar to what in your Ohio country is termed a cotillion. But there is no calling; we of New Mexico know it all by heart."

"Then I cannot dance it," I admitted. "I beg your pardon."

"There is waltzing, too, between sets. I will try you at the waltz, señor. When not waltzing, we will watch."

As if by chance she seated herself near old José. He glanced at me out of the wrinkled corner of his eye; but as a peón his only thought, evidently, was to serve his mistress and to enjoy to the full the galaxy of belles and beaux, in station far above him.

The dancers already were formed upon the floor, and resolving into two long lines, women opposite men. I thanked my stars that I had not been emboldened to take the floor also; for the dance proved complicated, although beautiful beyond description, and the Americans essaying it displayed only their ignorance.

Now the natives were in their glory, while maid and matron and gallant, vying with one another, advanced, retreated, curtsied and bowed and turned out well-shod calf, to wavings of scarf and handkerchief and much eyes. Amidst this pretty exchange, all without a word of direction, the teamsters and mountain-men indeed risked the stigma of buffalo bulls in a china shop.

Rude laughter began to assail them. I saw many a señorita bite her lip with vexation as her clumsy partner missed the cues entirely. I saw the yellow jacket of Don Antonio playing foil to the black bodice and crimson flower of the Señorita Rosa—and I endeavored not to observe. Then the music broke into a lively waltz; and extending my arm to the Doña Gertrudis I invited her to dance with me.

We made the first circuit in silence. She spoke beneath breath.

"You waltz well, señor. That is good. You got my note?"

"As you are aware, señora."

"I take an interest in you because—well, I, too, have Ohio blood in me. You are a boy of spirit. I saw you and Don Antonio at the bar. I can put one and one together; they form two, like two and two form

four. But two and one form only two and one. Your luck runs to the queen of hearts; are you going to stand aside and let somebody else play for her?"

"You mean ——?" I stammered.

"The winning gambler doubles on his card and never minds the other faces, be they knave, king, clubs, spades, diamonds, or what."

"In plain language ——?"

"In plain language, then, for heaven's sake dance with the Señorita Rosa. Instead of glooming in the doorway and pretending not to see, follow your luck, the same that has attended you upon the trail. She has noted you here more times than you would dream. I know every flutter of her eyelash, and she is the truest-hearted little chit in Santa Fé."

"She does not wish me. She sent no word," I faltered.

Doña Gertrudis laughed softly in my arms.

"The knave wins. There is only one card between your stake and the queen—and it wins. Very well. You would best go back to the Ohio."

A sudden rage inflamed me.

"Sabe Dios," said I. "But I'll dance with the señorita, first, if she does not refuse. I shall dance with her and prove that I'm at least not a boor."

"While gazing into her face forget not your back, señor mío," counseled the señora. "Antonio is a devil and you are only a heretic. The saints gladly deliver a heretic over to the devil. But you have a pistol underneath your shirt; I have felt it. 'Stá muy bueno."

The waltz measures ceased. As the dancers sta-

tioned themselves for another set we sank upon the seat that we had vacated. The ensuing figure appeared to be more intricate; but closely studying it I thought that I solved a certain repetition. In fact, shorn of the bowing and scraping and elaborate poses the cuna simmered down into a sort of waltz quadrille combined with the stately minuet.

The discomfiture of my uncultivated countrymen was increasing right along. One of the musicians now improvised in sing-song, launching Spanish-worded twit and jest which to the vast entertainment of the natives were pointed chiefly for the Americans. The rough fellows began sheepishly to quit, giving up in despair mock or real and leading their displeased but not unwilling partners to the benches. Soon the floor was surrendered almost completely to the triumphant native couples.

The cuna culminated in a slow waltz that gradually quickened until it left all breathless.

Oblivious of me, Don Antonio seated the señorita beside old José and joined the rush for refreshments. She was only a few yards removed from me. I waited with burning cheeks and beating heart while he lingered over her and she sipped her syrup. I felt his glance oblique, in my direction, but none from her; yet I knew that she knew.

A teamster leered down upon us, swaying as he stood.

"Tall doin's, young feller," he growled. "Them hombres calculate they put one over on us that time; hey? Muchas buenas, señora. You're my gal for the

next. We'll show 'em. And you, young feller, it's time you did your possible, too. Grab a gal yourself, when the music starts. Hell's fire! If I had your legs 'stead o' these hyar walkin' beams o' mine I'd cotton onto the purtiest señorita in the room, who's settin' by with a red flower in her ha'r. Wagh, I'd snake her from yonder yaller jacket in no time, quick as I'd snake sculp from an Injun."

"Válgame Dios, señor! You talk like a man," the doña approved.

"One more dram o' Taos, and I kin dance Spanish, Sioux, Comanche or Canuck, ma'am," he blurted. "Yes, and wrestle anything from a skeered painter to a sore grizzly b'ar. I'm gettin' half hoss, ma'am—and so," he significantly added, "are some o' the rest of us."

At that moment the musicians commenced to tune their instruments anew. Thus signaled I abruptly arose, with short bow of withdrawal, and strode straight to the señorita.

"Buenas noches, Señorita Rosa," I said, regardless of the don.

She looked up in manner as startled.

"Buenas noches, Señor Andrews."

"I would ask for the honor of the next dance with you." My voice sounded to me absurdly weak, but it may only have been drowned by the thumping of my pulses.

"It is yours." She extended her partially emptied glass to Don Antonio. "With your permission, then, segundo mío."

"As you say, carita." He bowed to me, and his smile was oddly malicious. "I resign to you my place in heaven, amigo. But not for long."

"Thanks," I responded drily. "God will reward you, surely, as you deserve."

The music burst forth strident. It was a slow waltz.

"Oh! The waltz despacio, señor," the señorita exclaimed delightedly, as with little shake of skirt she stood, to accept my expectant arms. But just as we made the first step, a clamor swelled.

"The cuna! What ails you, musicians? Stop! Whoa! The cuna! Again the cuna!"

The cries were all Spanish, in voices both of man and woman. Movement delayed, until in accordance with what must have been a prearrangement the musicians changed to the opening strains of the cuna.

"No! No! Spanish trick! Give us a waltz," bawled the Americans, to no avail. It was confusion. The cuna music continued, the native couples were forming their sets. I stood hesitant, with her in my arms.

"Shall we try, señor?"

Her little voice spoke bravely. It inspired me to be a man, once more. I was not going to be balked—not by any Don Antonio and ilk.

"I watched closely before; I think I can do it, with your help, señorita."

"Then we will try."

We found places. There were smiles for her, frowns for me, and blacker scowls for the other Americans who followed my example. Don Antonio was moodily

leaning against the wall near the doorway into the bar-room; his steady glower burned into my back. So resolved not to humiliate the señorita I did my clumsy prettiest, while she—ah, what a miracle of grace and loveliness, clear to the heart!

Thanks to her kindly promptings by smile and motion we got through the first evolutions; the music signaled for a waltz—the waltz despacio, now; the slow waltz in which one's feet scarce might lag enough for the long beats of the time.

Truth to say, this likewise bore hardly upon our teamsters and mountain-men, who were accustomed more to the galloping measures of the frontier. But I steadied my steps, by practice in the minuet at home. As light as thistle-down the señorita rested upon my arms, her scarf floating while we turned and turned, her jetty smooth hair scented as if by the flower in it. Don Antonio's burning gaze pursued, I gladly remarked, from where he leaned and smoked and chafed.

"You were long in asking me to dance, Don Ricardo."

"I did not know that it might be agreeable to you, señorita."

"You preferred Doña Gertrudis? Is she such a friend of yours?"

"I never saw her, before to-day. But she has acted my only friend, to date, among the Santa Féans; she, and the old señora with whom we are lodged."

"Your only friend, señor? She is a woman of fashion. I think you have patronized her table."

"No, señorita. I do not play the game."

"You won largely, I hear."

"The Long American won. I had no stake with which to venture, even if I had been minded."

"But you received the money, by José?"

"By Don Antonio, señorita. Flung at me, like charity. And also my quittance from your father's service. I welcome neither the one nor the other."

She almost stopped.

"Oh!" she gasped. "By Antonio? José did not say. It was uncivilly given?"

"Somewhat; and uncivilly declined, I fear. I did not want the pay, in that kind, and in money, señorita; and I shall always be in your service."

"But you did not come to the house, señor. We expected you—we expected you as a friend and guest. My father was disappointed."

"Why should I intrude, señorita? I waited only the word; and lacking that ——! You were in safety at last; I was in health again, and funds, and no longer to be an object of your pity, as at Independence. I appreciate your goodness of heart, señorita; but I am a man and I would rather fight with the dogs for a bone than attract charity from anybody, and most of all from you."

"Oh!" she gasped again. "At Independence! I remember. You looked so ill, and in need, señor. The good God tells us to share with the needy. I sent you the coin not in my name but His, señor. And here, José was to take you the money, only according to bargain, in our name, and the word, and you were to come with Don Antonio. The money was business;

the rest was as friends to friend. Antonio said you were drunk and gambling with the other wild Americans."

"You believed?"

"But the Americans do that. It is they who support the fonda."

"I am new to Spanish hospitality, señorita," said I. "And have no bent yet for drinking and gambling."

"That Antonio!" she uttered. "And José lied when he reported. They shall pay. Madre de Dios, they shall! But you will now come to see us? To see my father, anyway? He is ill, and he frets."

"I inquired after him. I was told that he is well."

"And you did not inquire for me? I have not your poor interest, señor?"

"I took the liberty, señorita. The words left my lips, sent forward from my heart. I refused your coin; I refused the money flung at me by Don Antonio; but I could not deny myself a decent gratitude for the favor shown me, a stranger and an American, by admitting me to your conversation along the trail."

"Favor?" She shuddered. "Oh, that trail! Yet I would not have missed it. There was no favor, señor—not to a caballero and a brave man. In that you ceased to be a stranger."

"Then favor I should prefer, Señorita Rosa," said I. "Your favor; but, believe me, not pity or charity. I do not claim to be a caballero of the stamp admired by José; but I am no less a man, whether brave or no, and an American besides. We Americans are apt to

be slow of speech, señorita, and awkward in a new tongue; but we see and feel and we can act ——"

There I choked with my emotions, like a calf at a pail. The attainable—the absolute, I would say, had been challenged by me, or so I thought; a new world, a ravishing new world, was here in my two arms; but confound if at the crucial moment my sentimental gush did not gorge in my throat, so that all I might do was to gather the world closer still, hoping for a miracle that I, betrayed as a rustic in the fine arts of love-making, did not deserve.

She sighed and slightly relaxed to my grasp.

"Dios!" she uttered, with tremulous little laugh. "Slow of speech? Seems to me you are a very ready speaker, señor. Will you come to see my father?"

"I will come to your father's house, señorita, before I leave. I will stay only for that—if you will permit me to see you also once more."

"Before you leave? You are going?" She queried intently, out of a sudden concern that I, in straits, dared not wholly appropriate. Maids have a way, they have a way; and none have more of such a way than the Spanish maids: a way leading nowhere. Steady, thought I; and answered like a Yankee.

"Why not? My home is in the States."

"But you will enter our house, first? My father requests."

"And you, señorita?"

"Don Antonio is only my segundo—my second cousin, and no near blood relative. He takes liberties with our family. José, of course, is only a peón; An-

tonio probably bribed him. That is past, señor. It is not our custom to be rude to those we accept as friends, and my father will be unhappy."

"You will be there, at the house, and I may see you, to-morrow?" I persisted.

"I am always at home, señor. We Santa Fé women do not go far from our parents."

"Until ——?" I suggested. For who could resist this flirtatious atmosphere?

She laughed, with delightful little shiver.

"Naturalmente! There comes the man, but quite often he stays, too. It also is the custom, Don Ricardo. Do you like our Santa Fé?"

The tone held mischief. I was thrown completely off my balance again.

"I might be made content never to leave, Señorita Rosa," I stammered.

The waltz ceased, for the cotillion figure. An intoxication of conquest buoyed me to a foolish pitch. The glower of Don Antonio egged me on to madden him; and so I pirouetted and bowed and clumped and scraped and grimaced, in defiance of him and of the gibes shot by the improvising musician.

The don had been joined by a group of other dark-faced young caballeros—leaning, smoking, their eyes glinting from under their broad, stiff hat-brims. A subtle menace seemed to permeate the air; and still our sets gamboled briskly, we few Americans competing for favor and honor with the scornful natives, and a gradually increasing knot of caballeros looking on.

The figure terminated in the two long lines, like the Virginia Reel, the ladies facing the men, and each couple advancing and retiring; there was the final waltz—the waltz redondo to rapid measure—and again we circuited the room, she and I. In my ecstasy I fancied that she yielded rather more closely, as if to recompense me for that scurvy treatment at other hands.

The couples broke; none more slowly than we. And at the very instant of handing our ladies to their seats the not unexpected happened: a concerted rush of the caballeros upon the floor, a burst of shouts, hoarse and shrill mingled. Knives flashed, benches and chairs were whirled on high, the girls and women fled pell-mell, shrieking, or cowered in their seats with their faces covered. The center of the floor space was filled with fighting men, swirling, wrestling, stabbing, striking, clubbing, cursing, and the ceiling shook to the cries.

"A scrimmage! At 'em, boys! Hooray for a scrimmage!"

"Out with the Americanos! Death to the Americanos! Vivan los Mexicanos!"

From the mêlée Don Antonio leaped like a cat at me, and struck with his fist—so eager as to forget his knife. He sent me staggering as I ducked and slipped; and head first I was engulfed in the whirlpool of combat—was shoved back and forth, buffeted by friend and foe. I glimpsed sombrero and flannel shirt—I heard blows and grunts—I saw the one-legged trapper deftly unstrap his wooden stump and flourishing it aloft blud-

geon right and left. Pegleg Smith—El Cojo Smet—was his name; a doughty fighter, he.

Outnumbered, we were being pushed toward the exit into the street. The candles flickered; quick hands swept them aside, we were entangled in dusk, and still we struck and writhed and swore; on a sudden the room was plunged in complete darkness, as the door from the gaming-room was slammed, and in a strong clutch I was dragged onward, pent amidst other perspiring bodies, into the open air.

The crowd poured after, men clinging together like bees, and fought on into the plaza. But that was haphazard work. We righted ourselves, my rescuer and I, and he spoke sharply.

"Qué tal—how about it? Are you hurt, compañero?" It was the Long American, breathing fast. "No? Child's play, that. There'll be skinned faces and a few broken heads, with a knife-thrust or two; but it's only a scratch-and-bite fracas. Those cussed young dons—they're a jealous parcel. Let's go our way. Have you had enough?"

"Plenty of that," I panted. "I came to a baile. Thank God, I had a taste of heaven before those bullies tried to change it."

"You certainly scored center. You put gall into the heart of one hombre when the queen turned up handsomely—eh? Come on, before there's a call to man-size weapons. You didn't out with the pistol, maybe?"

"No. I wouldn't shoot her cousin."

He grumbled as we paced away. The squalls and

hoots of the scattered combatants were lessening.

"What? You may change your mind. He's as poison as a mad wolf. There'd be no law for him north of the Arkansaw; but hereabouts—well, it's shoot and run or else spend the rest of your life in the Chihuahua calabozo."

"I'll not shoot, and I'll not run," I asserted. "And to-morrow I call at the house of Don Isidro. I am invited."

"Hey? Bueno! By gosh, hooray! I made no mistake when I enlisted you for Santa Fé. King, queen, knave—they only lacked the ace, and you're it. I'm the ten; and there's no ten-spot in a Spanish deck."

As he was talking riddles, and as I had thoughts of my own, very dear, I let him maunder. And through the pitchy streets, along which frightened figures scurried homeward, we reached the casa of the old señora.

She opened to our knock; bade us wait; then bestowed upon us a lighted candle, mumbling to us to extinguish it as soon as done with.

By the glimmer we spread our blankets in our room, removed our boots and I my outer garments and settled for the night.

"Mañana por la mañana, eh?" yawned the Long American, from his couch. "To-morrow morning? You pay your visit there to-morrow morning?"

"That is my intention. Will it be against custom?"

"She'll see you coming up the street," he chuckled. "Wah! Wish I were young and had had the world in my arms instead of that fat-ankled wench who smelled like a mushrat. Buenas noches, caballero."

"Good-night to you also, Jack," said I.

I was just drifting off upon rosy clouds when there was a low rap and a muffled hail without the casa door. The old señora querulously responded; now she rapped upon our own door, and reported:

"Some one wishes to see you, señores."

We drew on clothing and boots and in the darkness stumbled forth. José was awaiting us, shrouded in his serape.

"El señor mayor, Don Isidro, desires you at the casa, señores. He asks your pardon for disturbing you, but it is urgent."

"Tell him we are coming," my patron replied.

"Gracias." And the indistinct figure of José shuffled from sight.

The Long American exulted.

"Meat's in the pot, by thunder! And I'm willing to risk burnt fingers getting it out. Fetch your Hawken, though; that sort of plunder has a comfortable heft to it—and quién sabe?"

"You know the house?"

"Many's the time I've viewed it from the wrong side. I've never entered. Ready? Then stretch out and keep close. These streets are as crooked as a cottonwood branch."

The town seemed asleep, all save the dogs. They yapped furiously as we moved at rapid pace, like

thieves. I asked no questions of my partner; but surely, I mused, this is a strangely-timed summons. And I wondered should we see the señorita?

In that expectation I was doomed to disappointment.

CHAPTER IX

I AM BILKED AGAIN

The Long American hastened onward with the assurance of a forest rover following a blazed trail. After some windings and turnings he stopped short, sought briefly, and rapped upon a plank door set into the clay wall.

The door swung.

"Bien, señores. He is waiting."

And barring the door again, José, faintly seen, led us through an enclosed flowery court, into the house. Here, thank heaven, we had the light of a taper; and passing down a long hall we were ushered into the presence of Don Isidro.

He was extended upon a mattress of blankets, against the wall beside the corner fireplace from which the blazes of stacked-up pinyon shone ruddily. It was a bare room. Save for the low couches, and a picture or two of the saints, it contained no furnishings whatsoever. To my grief it lacked also that which would have made of it a palace: the señorita.

The don did not arise.

"Bien venido—welcome, señores," he greeted. "Enter. Be seated. You are in your own house."

"At your disposal, señor don," we answered, to his politeness; and seated ourselves upon a couch.

I could not help but notice that despite the firelight he was shockingly pale and weazened; his very voice bespoke his feebleness.

"I must apologize for having disturbed you, señores," he said. "But time presses. The loss of blood to that accursed lance puts age under heavy handicap to retrieve. I no longer make blood. What goes, is gone, and I miss it as a miser misses his coins."

"You will grow strong again, señor," I ventured; "nursed in your home, in this Santa Fé."

"God knows," he replied. "I am in the hands of God, and He has already apportioned me more than seventy years. Myself, I think that I shall not leave this couch until I am borne to the church."

"God grant you many days," old José muttered, from his corner.

These formalities were necessary. Now the don spoke with more briskness than customary among the Spanish.

"I have asked the favor of your presence at this hour, señores, in order to relieve my mind of burdens. It is strange that I, a Spaniard of Mexico, should turn to Americans, at the last. However, that is as God wills, and I recognize men when I see them. José, the trunk."

José uncovered the trunk of the blankets that had transformed it into a seat, and carried it across the room to his master's couch. The Long American at my side slightly tensed, but said only "With your permission, señor," and applied spark to his cigarette.

"There are two treasures in this house, señores,"

the don continued. "I would place them both in good hands. The one is already disposed of, to Don Antonio. The matter is settled. He is of the gente fina and will be a rico. I apologize, young señor, for his treatment of you this afternoon, but the Spanish blood flows hot in the veins of youth, and he was jealous. That is past. He is content, and so is my daughter."

I had lost her! My ears hummed so that I scarcely heard his next words.

"All else that I have is yours, young señor. It may be little, it may be much, but you saved me from death by the barbarians and you and your compañero deserve my best gratitude. You are true friends, one to the other?"

"We are like son and father, señor," I uttered. "Without him I would be nothing."

"That is well. Then, you will share. This will take two men—and two brave men. You have observed my trunk, señores?"

"Sí, señor," the Long American acknowledged imperturbably.

"You have heard rumors of what it might contain?"

"That is common matter, Don Isidro. A caravan is full of gossip. Some said treasure, some said no, and less than no. As for me, quién sabe, sabe Dios? And Don Ricardo had other business than that of prying into your affairs."

"A knife, then, José," bade the old don.

He threw back the rickety lid, and there was ex-

posed, as before, only the miserable sheepskin shirt and the red flannel petticoat.

"A garment of my daughter's," he apologized. "For winter wear. She has not yet required it. The other —listen, señores: Many years ago my grandfather located a gold mine in the mountains. It is infidel country, una tierra bien maldita—a country all accurst. Half a million pesos were taken out before the savages seized it. They would permit no Spanish there. Those pesos lasted our family a long time; few remain today. My father twice attempted to reopen the mine, and was driven away. I once attempted it; and I too was driven down with loss of men. Now it is yours, señores, if you will accept."

"Muchísimas gracias, señor," my friend responded, with a nonchalance which concealed a little stir of exultation that I perceived but did not share. "Why not Don Antonio, who will be the husband of your señorita daughter?"

"Ahora bien—agreed," he replied impatiently. "However, Antonio will be a rico, anyway, in the near future. He is a young man of good parts—his wildness will wear off—but he is not the man for such a venture. In some things you Americans excel us, señores: you are masters of the savages. You have the arms and the boldness that make them respect you; us they only hate. I would not send Antonio on the quest. I do not wish my daughter to be a widow in her youth. And the government would take all his profits if he were successful. It is a watchful and jealous government we have, señores."

"You possess papers, then, señor?"

"De veras sí—yes, indeed." With his knife he ripped open the hide lining of the trunk cover, to extract a piece of yellowed parchment. The Long American leaned forward more intent, and drew quick breath of interest. Still I could not rise to the occasion. What were even millions in gold, compared with my great loss? She was betrothed to Antonio; in light of this, all the mines of the Incas were dross. And I sickened as I sat stolid.

"You see the old Spanish grant," pursued the don. "It may be worthless now—who knows? Nothing is secure, in these days of the greedy arm stretched from the palacio. The only security for you is your rifles, and the friendship of the savages. You should make a treaty with them. You must not return to Santa Fé. As a matter of form I will sign this grant over to the young señor. Keep it close, and some day—but again, who knows?" He turned the shirt inside out. "Here is the map of the country and the mine, on this very shirt descended to me from my father and his father. No one not in the secret has suspected this shirt."

"A plaguey good scheme," praised the Long American, in round English.

"Cómo?" queried the don. He resumed. "Come forward and inspect both. They are genuine."

The Long American crossed alertly. I could do naught but follow. The parchment, creased and dingy, bore antique Spanish script. The inside of the shirt back was traced with black in curious design.

"Santa Fé," pointed out the old don, with trembling finger. "The trail. These are La Sierra del Oro—the Mountains of Gold, as they are called. The mine is there. Is it plain?"

"Passably, señor," uttered the Long American, studying. "The map is very old?"

"More than one hundred years, señor."

"The country will have changed."

"Undoubtedly, in some respects; not so, in others. Where the savages hold sway, a country never changes. It all is yours. Do you accept?"

"We accept, señor. We are in your debt."

"Not so. I would only balance accounts. 'Stá bueno." And the don sighed with satisfaction. "I have endeavored to do what is right, I have disposed of my all, I can die content. I am tired now, señores. Permit me to say 'Á Dios.' Go with God. I advise you to set out early in the morning, before the city is stirring. It will sleep late, and you will be far upon your way before there are eyes to mark you. And you will not come back, to thrust your head into the jackal's mouth. Vaya con Dios. I will sign over the paper. You have pack animals?"

"No, señor."

"The paper and map will be waiting for you in the hands of a servant, at daybreak to-morrow, upon the Cerrillos road out of the city. There will be burros, and a few poor supplies. The servant will guide you to the mountains. More I cannot do. The rest lies with you. Go with God, and keep your own counsel."

He had dismissed us; his voice was weakening. The Long American straightened; I straightened.

"We thank you, señor," responded my friend. "The gift is very great; but if you think that the work is for Americans, we will do it. It is a pity to let the mine waste itself because of the worthless Indians. Á Dios, señor; may God grant you many days yet."

"Á Dios, señor; y gracias," was all that I could stammer.

"Con Dios, then. I have said." And he sank back as if exhausted. José hastened to him with a vial. We made exit—I with heart heavy.

Once in the street the Long American was all elation.

"By thunder!" he blatted. "I felt it—we shot plumb center, again. I had a notion that the old gent was going to quit himself of that property. No Mexican will risk hair in those parts. Not by a jugful! The don's no love for the governor, either. Let that mine be reopened by a native—and good-bye to it. Armijo is too smart to overlook a bet like that. The whole thing would be confiscated for the revenue of the province, which means Armijo, el gobernador. Bueno! Hey? Speak up."

"You may have it," said I.

"What? Tut, man! Because you've lost the girl? Lord love you, there are other gals; the States are full of 'em and they're white, but you don't get a gold mine thrown at you more than once in a lifetime. Maybe she fancied you, and maybe not; but you don't think the old man or the priest will let her marry a heretic,

do you? Not much, compañero! It would be shoot and run, anyway, for you, with a pack on your heels every step to the Arkansaw. The mine! That's the caper. Luck has been with us ever since we left Independence. I sort o' suspected how 'twould turn at the last, and turn it has."

"This was your game, you mean? You had this in prospect when you picked me up?"

"You bet yuh! The girl and the mine, or the mine alone; didn't matter."

"In other words, you sought to use me for your purpose?" I challenged.

"For the purpose of doing us both good. Por Dios, but you have no call to be sore. I took a liking to you. I sized you up properly. What were you then? Wolf meat. What are you now? Muy hombre, and liable to fleece your back with gold. To tell the truth, the don was somewhat beholden to me; I had done him favors in St. Louis on several occasions. On other hand, I stood no show to win the señorita against that caballero. I don't shine, in looks, and I've squaws elsewhere. But you could run counter to him—win the gal and the family mine, or, if not, then win general favor that might set us on the trail. And, by thunder, so you did."

"You knew what was in the trunk?"

"No more than a guess—and you heard my guess. I've seen inside the traveling trunks of those alleged ricos before. His mine is common report, though. 'Tis a byword all along the trail. But, sho', the country's full of old Spanish workings. Still, the game

was worth the candle. We had little to lose. [Little to lose, indeed!] · Now are you satisfied?"

"What can we do, yonder?" I faltered. I truly owed him health, if nothing else.

"Inside, we can load the burros, at least. We'll pack our proofs back to the States, anyhow—and there'll be men enough to cast in with us. We'll arrange with the governor, all right; he'll take a percentage, or he'll take nothing; and he'll take nothing if he tries to take all. Sabe? Those Comanches would heap rather have the Americans with 'em against the Mexicans, than have us both to fight. By gosh, we can fetch in enough Americanos to capture the whole country; it ought to belong to the United States."

Thus he prattled on, as we set foot for our room. But I saw no gold in life. I should never return, she was promised to Don Antonio, she had agreed, she had played on me in sport—they all had played on me, as seemed—and I held the bag for my friend.

Well, if there was nothing in love of man for woman, there was something in friendship of man for man. I could not gainsay him in his success; I would not seem ungrateful of the opportunities afforded me. So be it.

Therefore I tried to join in with his plans. After making ready for the early start in the morning it was some time ere we both fell asleep. Out of troubled dreams I was aroused by his urgent voice.

"Ketch up, ketch up! The old dame's cooking chocolate. I've given her hush money; she'll know nothing. Saddle your mule. My animal's ready."

I dressed quickly and stepped out. The fire was blazing in the corner fireplace; the old señora, mumbling, was crouched before it, preparing our breakfast. The darkness of the open was tinged with gray, the air was crisp and frosty. By sense of touch as well as by that of sight I saddled my mule, tied my blanket on, and in so much was ready also.

When after breakfast we rode away the night had so paled that the squat mud houses upon either side of the street were defined in all their ugliness; yet I looked upon them with longing, for Santa Fé had grown strangely beautiful to me. Now at this hour it was a slumberous, deathly quiet place; our hoof thuds awakened even no dogs, where they were closely curled against the chill.

"El Camino Cerrillos," spoke the Long American, turning into another street—or a road, rather. We had left the bulk of the houses behind. "The don's hombre should be waiting somewhere ahead," he added.

"If he isn't? If it's a trick?" I hopefully prompted.

"On we go in spite of the devil and all his works, then. I did my possible to transfer that map, hoof, hide and tail, to my brain, and we'll make shift without it. But there's no trick. I know Don Isidro, and he daren't back-track on us. The governor would pay us well for the little secret of that trunk. If you fear Tony—hah!"

A mounted figure emerged from within the shadow of a lifeless building beside the trail. We were forced to rein sharply, rifles on the alert.

CHAPTER X

WE TAKE THE TREASURE TRAIL

"Buenos días, señores."

"Qué quiere—what do you want? Quién es—who are you?" the Long American challenged.

"Su criado—your servant. No hay nada—there is nothing to fear. I am from Don Isidro, with the burros."

"Solo?"

"Sí; alone, señores."

"Bring them out and ride before; we will follow."

"As you say, señor."

Of form indistinguishable in blanket cloak and huge straw hat the peón marshaled four burros—two well laden—into the road, and drove them on under cover of our guns. With due precautions of ambush we also passed on, and were unmolested.

"Wait, hombre."

We arrived where he obediently waited in the clear.

"You have a paper for us?"

"Yes, señor." And he extended a crinkly packet. The Long American unfolded it, and peered.

"'Stá muy bueno." He handed it to me. "'Tis yours, lad."

"I do not want it," said I.

"Tarnation! Are you still in the dumps? Take it, I say. Stow it on your person. It may mean millions and it may mean naught; but keep it as a chance."

So I took it, to oblige him.

"You have something else, hombre?"

"Yes, señor."

"Show it to me."

The peón exhibited a roll tied with thongs. The Long American sniffed it, hefted it, and was assured.

"'Tis the same. Smells of two hundred years, more or less. Muy bien! Where to put it?" Forthwith he returned it. "I shall ask for it later, amigo. What is your name?"

"Diego, señor; your servant."

"You are to guide us to the mountains, by the right road?"

"Sí, señor, so that you may not go astray. There are many trails in one direction and another."

"That is good. Ride ahead, that we may follow."

"Gracias, señor."

Through the increasing dawn we jogged along, Diego leading with the burros. The road was a country road, amidst low cedars and pinyons and coarse shrubs of a wide flat, and stretching straight into the west of south where lay, I imagined, one of the bluish mountain ranges remarked upon our approach to Santa Fé yesterday. Dios! How pale and dead seemed yesterday and our gay whip-popping entry into the ciudad! Only last night's cuna, and the señorita in my arms, were still vital.

The east had brightened to silver, against which

the Santa Fé Mountains stood starkly etched, lightened by their blotches of white snow. Entrancing by day, now they loomed sombre and cold, overlooking the town. But our trail, according to the Long American, pointed toward the yellow of gold, and with town and dark range we had nothing to do. Adiós, señorita mía. And next for a fling at the Comanches.

In the first glow of pink we had topped a rise; the ciudad of Santa Fé had sunken into its valley, and before us that range containing the Mountains of Gold bided yet far removed, its flanks and foot-hills indistinct but its peaks hard-cut and faintly luminous in the day-beams of the upper spaces.

Our peón steadily urged on the burros. Now revealed, he was clad, as I had surmised, in serape or blanket of coarse gray wool, through the center of which his head was thrust, so that the folds draped him from neck clear to heels. The broad brim of his large hat was clapped down upon his shoulders; and as he sat hunched upon his mule he looked misshapen. Santa Fé, I judged, had many of him—simple, humble, priest-ridden and tax-burdened, pawns who recked not what was the next move upon the board.

"Yon is the country," asserted my friend, over shoulder.

"How distant now?" I essayed.

"A good thirty miles, but we'll reach it before the sun is three hours high. Once in, and the Old Nick may take Santa Fé; he won't get us." He called: "Oye, amigo!"

"I hear, señor."

"We will not stop until we are at the mountains."

"'Stá bueno, señor. In three hours and a half."

We pushed on. We met nobody, we saw nothing in motion except a coyote or two, rabbits, a humpily scurrying badger. The Long American occasionally glanced behind, down our trail.

"All clear as yet. But a man can't breathe at ease while he's in the open, this way. Thanks be, after the fracas those folks yonder will sleep late, and be leery of showing themselves. If 'twasn't for the burros ——! Anyhow, we'll have to reckon only with Mister Don Antonio. Does that name make you wolfish?"

"I've no object in injuring him," said I.

"He'd lift your hair, nevertheless, and do it pronto," my friend rebuked. "Buck up, hombre. You'd have won the girl, had you been of same race as he; by the powers, I believe you did win her, though you can't marry her. Yes, and I'd have helped you hustle her off, were it not for this bigger stake." He must have observed the misery in my face, for his tone changed. "I judge you were far gone in that quarter; eh?"

"I loved the señorita more than life, or other wealth," said I. "A thousand gold mines do not tempt me now. I would trade with Don Antonio on almost any terms, if I might have only her."

"What? Is that the way you feel?" He laughed shortly, and twisted about again in his saddle. "You'll think better of it, after a spell. You can buy a wife, any time, if you have the wherewithal; I've bought several, and they were good ones. As for trading with

Don Antonio—don't make him the offer or you're liable to swap sound property for damaged."

His words hurt; and I was shamed to discuss her name in such common fashion, for our voices carried in the thin air and how much the peón might guess I did not know.

"I care to talk no more on the subject," said I. "Kindly drop it."

The sunshine bathed the range first; as it flashed broader it came to meet us, but the valley of Santa Fé, behind, was still enveloped in blue shadow cast by the high mountains on its east.

The road constantly branched into narrower sheep trails and burro trails that wended off apparently haphazard; and presently on the main trail we began to encounter countrymen or paisanos, heading for the ciudad with their burro loads of wood, meat, hides and so forth. They passed us with murmured "Buenos días, señores," and sharp sidelong scrutiny from their muffling cloaks. Consequently it was a relief when Diego, driving his little train at a quick amble, struck into a fork that diverged at wide angle upon course of its own across the rolling mesa, for the heart of the great barrier in the south.

"Well, there'll be gossip in the market-place, when those paisanos trade in news of the day," the Long American remarked. "But no harm done, I fancy. We're nearing sanctuary. Qué hay, amigo!" he called. "Make haste by the shortest way."

"Sí, señor."

The mesa had become a labyrinth of blind trails,

until, as we trotted into wash and out again, they thinned, so that led by Diego we were pursuing scarce a trail at all. I might sense that we were approaching the danger zone, within pouncing distance from the coverts yonder where the savages, couched like vultures, were prepared for forays at sight of attractive spoil.

The mountain flanks had appeared all bare, saving the snow streaks; but now serried pines were visible, stiffly aligned against the sky and stationed along the amber slopes. The purplish depths of numerous canyons gradually opened. The whole barrier was brooding and mysterious, as it towered higher and higher, vaster and vaster; and before it, we, riding onward across the slightly rising, lonely mesa, with odd detached cones, like immutable sentinels, watching our advance, were figures very small.

Although we were traveling at steady pace, uneasiness still governed the Long American. From the vantage points he regularly turned to eye the horizon at rear.

"The sun has waked them," he proffered. "I see the breakfast smoke. But 'twill be only the peones, for a time yet. The gentry will stay abed. Let's hope that after last night the young don has such a head he'll prefer his blankets or the sunshine to his señorita."

"But who would tell him?"

"Who wouldn't—caramba! I'll wager that rascal José is bound for his door already, with a mouth full. And there's the girl, remember."

I remembered.

"The señorita? You don't think the señorita would set him on our trail? On mine? On yours? When her father sent us?"

The Long American grunted contempt.

"Quién sabe? We're foreigners and heretics. Those Mexicanos all herd together. The old don's a down bull; the young one has the heifer and it's up to her to act the pretty. What else can she do? I know women."

I didn't, but I had hoped to know one.

"We cannot blame her, then," I reminded. "Whatever she does I'll hear no word against her."

The range had so perceptibly neared that a stranger to the clearness of the atmosphere might deem the hither slopes within hail. Indeed the space was shorter than I had dared to accept, for at the close of another half hour we were about to enter the foot-hills by means of a narrow draw.

With a decisive glance behind, the Long American abruptly called: "Oye, amigo! Wait!" and spurred to the fore.

"This is enough, amigo. The map; then you may leave us, with our thanks, and que tenga buen viaje—a pleasant journey to you."

The fellow sat sullen, replying no word, when I joined.

My partner spoke on.

"You were to guide us to the mountains. Bueno! That is done. Give me the map; go back, with God, and say nothing as you value your life."

"I will continue, señor." The voice was low and obstinate.

"Gracias, but no. We will not require you." And the Long American rapped, aside, to me: "To have him back-tracking some fine night would be tall doin's, eh? We'll run no risk of that, you bet!" He suavely addressed the man.

"Don Isidro said to the mountains, and we are here. We go on alone; give me the map and you have finished. Then á Dios, amigo, and keep your lips together, or ——!" He drew his palm edge across his lean throat.

"I will continue, señores, and show you the way. You cannot find it." The fellow's insistence was provoking, his features difficult to see.

"That is not for you to say, amigo," chided the Long American. "The rascal acts possessed by the devil," he muttered in English; and resumed. "The map, quick, or I'll have you by the ears. You shall point out on it the way. Then go, and Don Isidro will reward you."

Out came the roll of shirt. The Long American twitched at the knotted thong, to untie it. He peered, scanning the one side, and the other. His face reddened.

"Diablo te lleve—devil take you! What is this, you rogue? It is not the right one! You have tricked us? Where is the parcel Don Isidro gave you?"

At the fury of the rapid words the fellow cowered ——

"Have patience, señor. Let us hasten ——"

"No, by all the saints!" With a single leap of his horse my friend had reached, to clutch at the shrinking shoulder. In the shock the big hat went flying. I heard a piteous cry, and saw the affrighted eyes and the massy hair of the Señorita Rosa.

I, too, uttered a cry, a startled exclamation with word I know not what. The arm of the Long American dropped as if paralyzed; he stared, momentarily smitten dumb. The señorita's eyes veiled, downcast; a vivid blush deepened the stain with which she had tried to coarsen her lovely skin.

The Long American burst to hot anger again, voiced in stinging English and Spanish.

"Thunder almighty! The fat's afire! There's a party on the trail behind—paisanos or not, I've been marking them for half an hour. And here we're palavering with a girl! Where is that map, señorita? Understand? Speak quick."

"I have it on me, señor," she quavered; and she shot sudden imploring eyes at me.

CHAPTER XI

WE SEEK THE LITTLE DOOR

"Off with it, then," he bade rudely. "I care not whether you're man or woman. Off with it, or, as I've two hands ——!" And he gathered himself, threatening.

She paled.

"Not here, señor. I know the way. We will go on—we must hurry."

He bawled, clean lost to temper.

"Por Dios, no! We'll have that map in our own keeping but we'll have no wench. I've talked enough." He lunged for her, at full horse's length.

She cringed, evading. I heard her cry out—I thought that I caught my name, and I thrust in between them, forcing him back.

"Take care, man!" I warned. "Don't touch her or you have to deal with me."

His brows knitted as he surveyed us both.

"So! That's how the land lies, does it? She goes on with us? She goes on in the shirt, rather than back without it? An instant, now." He whirled for a spurt to scan the open country anterior to the mouth of the draw.

"Why did you do this, señorita?" I reproached, while my heart beat reveille to hope.

She colored, and spoke with face half averted.

"It was the only safety for you, señor. I have learned the trail so well, from my father's lips."

"Does your señor father know of this?"

"I bribed the real Diego. He knows now, I think —my father."

"You are—you have the map?"

"It is where it is, señor." She leveled brimming look upon me. "Otherwise you two would have sent me back. I hoped you would not discover so soon."

The Long American came.

"They're after us," he grimly announced. "Or signs so say. Stretch out; never mind the burros. It's run or fight."

"We'll stay where we are, and wait for them," I replied. "We'll not go on."

He gaped.

"Not go on?"

"No. Not with the señorita. That's unthinkable."

"But you've wanted her, and here she is. We've lost the mine, like as not—no matter. We'll not pull out empty-handed. Nombre de Dios, boy! You've won. Her reputation's done for, as is. All Santa Fé will hoot at her. Even Antonio won't risk her. Follow your luck, lad. If the shirt's no bueno you've got the petticoat, or what it stands for."

The señorita proudly lifted her head and straightened her young body in the cheap cloaking.

"Yes, you may speak English. I understand." Good English were her words. "As for Antonio, he is only my cousin; nothing more. My name is my

own." And she added, with little break of voice: "If I have to defend my reputation, I will make my own answers, too."

"You speak English?" I gasped.

"Certainly. I was at school in St. Louis. I learned both French and English."

So she knew by the conversation upon the trail and here, that I loved her! Huzza! Now I could fight an army.

"Get on with us, then!" rasped the Long American. "Save breath. We sit here talking nothings while they're fetching the calabozo to us. With you once behind lock and key in Santa Fé, young lady, and this lad en cárcel at Chihuahua, there'll be an end for once and all to whatever you think to do. We can only ride and ride belly scraping."

I shook my head; whereupon she spoke again, with another lift of chin.

"I deceived you about the map. I am not wearing it. It is underneath my cloak. Here——" She handed out a smaller parcel. "Go on without me, if that is the quickest way. Please go. I'll meet them and they may take me back. That will satisfy them. I'm sure it will."

I was off my mule.

"We stay here unafraid, or we both go back now," I said. "You've been with us merely since daybreak. I'd be no man to send you back alone—and I'd be less a man to let you go on with us. That's flat. And you," said I to the Long American, "may do as you choose. You have the map; here is the grant—I give

it to you. I'll make it over to you later." And I thrust it upon him. "You are at liberty to betake yourself off, so adiós and good luck."

He threw himself from his horse.

"Hanged if I will! I think we're all mad together —mad as squaws at a scalp dance; but here we'll fort, if that's your say, and stand 'em straight up while we talk a bit. It's as good a place as any."

And such it appeared to be, for the slopes approached each other and two men might command the passage. Muttering tart comment upon the inconvenience of women in general, our ally rapidly directed.

"Turn those burros in behind us and tie the saddle critters. And you, Miss Señorita Rosa —— Look out!" he exclaimed, springing to his animal. "She's away! Taken the bit in her teeth, by Henry!"

Scattering the burros, on her mule my sweetheart was bolting up the draw at a pace to defy all pursuit.

"It's whether or no with her. Confound!" The Long American was in the saddle. "But come on. That's our trail."

Forward he dashed, and I after. The draw deepened and constricted until soon it was a canyon with steep sides. The señorita's start had carried her around a shoulder that swallowed hoof beats also; but as we cleared the same spot we sighted her again. We had gained a trifle; she was not quite so far in the advance, and the canyon had waxed more difficult, being littered with rocks and cut by washes.

Insistent we overhauled her, until the gravel spumed from her mule's busy hoofs pelted us shrewdly.

"We can't pass her," flung my partner. He hailed: "Qué tal? Qué tiene? Dónde va? What's the matter? Where are you going?" And—"Wait a bit, señorita."

She turned tear-stained indignant face.

"To the mine, of course. If you're afraid of me, don't follow."

"But wait, wait!" I begged.

"I'll not wait unless you promise to go on."

So there was nothing for us to do save to follow, but perforce in fashion somewhat less suggestive of a rout. Trail there was none, excepting a few intervals that had survived rains and snows. A tortuous stream bed, now dry, formed the canyon's bottom, and the canyon's brushy sides were so irregular that at times we were scrambling along part way up and at times we were confined to the bed itself, between horse-high walls. To push forward and head the señorita off was, as said, well-nigh impossible; moreover, for what result?

Her mule fagged under her, to a jog, and a walk; showed symptoms of stalling; so that after a time she reined in and waited at last, while putting up her disarranged hair.

"You're coming, are you?" she accused, defiant but altogether charming.

"Wherever you go, I go, querida mía," I answered.

At that Spanish term which means rather more than simply "My dear" she smiled with sudden wondrous break, then flamed again.

"Not back, though. I'm not afraid, but I won't have you taken. Will you let me go back alone?"

"Never!"

She drew in her lower lip, perplexed.

"All right. Come."

"How far to that mine, señorita?" the Long American demanded.

"Several miles. I do not know exactly, but I know the landmarks. We must hurry."

"They'll find our burros and be mighty cautious for a space," he reasoned. "And it'll call on more than Mexican spunk to press fast by this kind of a trail into Injun country. Bueno! Lead ahead, señorita. There's no use our stopping here. What sort of region is that yonder, 'cording to your father's say? Water?"

"Yes. There's a spring, and only the one way in. A few brave men can hold it if they have the weapons."

"As choice 'twixt devils, we'll play the red; it's been our luck," he decided. "Eh, compañero?"

"The mine matters little as far as I'm concerned," I replied. "But where she goes, I go; and ——"

"So I've been hearing," he drily interrupted.

"And," I continued, "if you're both set on the mine, the mine it is. That seems to be the only sanctuary."

"At least till we can take stock and figure on the next deal," he asserted. "We ought to be heading soon for the Arkansaw if this is a proper squaw-stealing raid."

"Oh!" she cried; and was away again, urging her mule on up the canyon.

The route widened but remained rocky and slow, compelling us to pick a path. I marked her peering right and left as if in vaguely calculative search; and we had gone perhaps three miles when she more resolutely turned aside and entered a fork canyon whose mouth opened between two buttresses of dull red rock like swollen parted lips.

This tributary canyon, crooked and winding, tolled us onward for a mile; whereupon she stopped short, to scan around.

"It should be here," she panted. "Dios mío, it should be here. I am certain. We came in between two red cliffs; then there was about a mile. You see the landmark—that rock like a chimney. But Dios mío, if I should be mistaken!" And she eyed me unwinking. "I would be lost forever."

"You shall be protected with my life," said I. "Nothing shall harm you, and I will answer in person for your name."

"But the mine," prompted the Long American, impatient. "You say 'here.' Well, where? What's the sign to follow up?"

"Opposite that chimney, Don Juan."

"In the open?"

"No, no! It is La Mina de la Puertecita—the Mine of the Little Door. We enter to it through a crack, a very narrow passage in this canyon wall. The mine is beyond, on the side of a basin all rimmed about. We must find the door."

"Easier said than done, like many other things," he muttered, doubtfully squinting at the high broken can-

yon wall where pinyons and cedars and shrubs had gained lodgment. "But, by the powers, we'll try. Work fast."

He hammered his horse across; with an eye to the rock chimney for guidance dismounted and began to rummage amidst the growth. I joined him. Of human visit preceding ours there was no trace, so that we might only poke and cast blindly, opposed by the stiff branches and matted twigs.

My sweetheart made her way to me.

"Can't you find it?"

"Not yet."

"It should be here. María purísima, it must be here," she sighed. "If it isn't, what have I done?"

"You have gained two good men for your side, querida," I soothed. "And one will never leave you."

"You shall not go back," she reiterated. "There's danger. You don't know our Spanish people. I will go to my father. He ——"

"Acá! Here! I've found it. Hooray!" 'Twas the joyous summons of the Long American, himself unseen. "B' gosh, you bet yuh!" he added.

We hastened to the sound of his scuffings; and just as we arrived at the spot he appeared right before us, issuing from a cleft in the rock wall almost concealed by cedars.

"There's sign of a trail through," he proclaimed. "And a hint of open country beyond. I went far enough to see that. Let's fetch the animals in. Stay here, señorita, and charm the spirits off."

"It's the very place—the Mine of the Little Door,"

she breathed, her hand to her heart. "Oh, my father! But it is yours, yours. Please hurry."

When we returned with the horse and the two mules she had vanished. The Long American humored no misgivings, would have brooked no delay; and indeed I was confident that she had preceded us inside. He led his horse, I forced my sweetheart's mule after, and pursued, tugging at my own brute.

The passage was barely wide enough for single file of man and beast. It slanted in sharply, like a crack of the cliff. Above, it gathered narrowly, affording merest glimpse of the blue sky. Underfoot one might descry a slight hollowing and smoothing by ancient trail, relic of sole and hoof remote. Of definite Indian sign we saw naught, thank God; for that was now my dread: the Indian. All the Mexicans in the province I feared not a whit so long as I had her and my rifle. But the Indian! However, we must trust to our wits and our boldness; and if the savages did come down upon us before we were safely out, we would meet them in round American fashion, not Spanish. The words of the old don held a goodly measure of truth.

We worked through, emerging to the vista of a round and silent basin. She was already here in the open, the señorita, palpitant, surveying eagerly.

"It's to the right," she called. "So said my father. Four hundred paces from the entrance."

The basin was like a deep-painted saucer completely sunken, as far as might be seen, into reddish surrounding rock strangely castlemented, from whose interior bases the fragments loosened by weather had sifted

down to form steep gravelly slopes, cedar-and-pinyon dotted. Some grasses grew in the bottoms, but the ruddy soil showed unfertile, for the sage and greasewood had dwarfed.

With the sun streaming in, and not a breath of air sensible to cheek or nostrils, despite the season the retreat was burning hot, and lifeless, and allured while it repelled by its menace of hushed, suspended mysteries.

CHAPTER XII

WE ARRIVE AT GOAL

THE Long American paid small tribute to the spell. He acted brusquely, as usual.

"To the right, four hundred paces, eh? Wait. Let's take a squint at this map." He squinted.

"The map does not show figures, Don Juan," she proffered. "But I have heard my father say. He knows."

"No more it doesn't. It shows the turn in, and the chimney, and a couple of crosses for passage and mine. We'll have to search on our own hook. There should be some old workings, to catch the eye, I'll wager."

We mounted and rode to the right, skirting the basin's edge while we scanned the slope in. The trail had pinched out in the sod; then we struck it again, lost it—and the Long American, leading, paused to estimate the distance from the gateway.

"It should be hereabouts ——" But a cry from the señorita cut him short.

"Oh, come!"

She had strayed apart from us. We might see her amidst the brush a little up the slope, staring rigid. I thumped my tired mule. We made over to her. Her tone and attitude pricked me with alarm.

"What is it?"

"A skeleton—man's bones," she whispered. "See? Santísima!"

Bones were whitely visible in the bushes beside a faint trail. The Long American vaulted off, to examine.

"Clean picked many a year, these," he reported. "Mexicano, I judge." He handled a starkly bleached skull to which still clung a vestige of black hair. "Sí. Comanche meat, too, I'll venture. Yes, for here's the arrow point, quitted of the ribs. 'Stá bueno. Let him guard the trail. Come ahead, you two. We're on right track or I'm poor guesser."

The thread of a trail conducted truly, so that as we issued upon a welt of the inslope the Long American uttered anticipatory warning.

"Where they dumped earth! Now cast your eye 'round for the workings close above."

The slope here might once have been built into a shelf-like level; the soil showed indications of having been redeposited; but the contour had flattened, was broken by rocky outcrops, embellished by warmly fragrant young cedars, and flowed smoothly to merge with the general incline. The quiet, as we paused to weigh, measure and invite with eye and other senses, was a curious—which is to say interrogative—quiet as if we were under surveillance by eyes in the very trees. I heard only my sweetheart's rapid breathing.

"The workings should be yon," mused the Long American, peering. "I believe I see traces, too."

Dismounted, he was hot upon the quest again and

clambering into the slope so that pebbles drained down from his moccasins.

"You must rest, querida mía," said I, "while I help him. You are tired."

"No matter. Only find the mine," she bade.

But tired she was, by mute confirmation of her heavy eyes and wan smile and the sag to her small form as she sat the placid mule.

"First I'll lift you off."

"As you wish, Ricardo," she consented.

She yielded to me with a sigh. I bestowed her in the shade of a cedar. When, afoot, I reached the Long American he was standing sweat wrung, surveying, as might be, the goal, diagonally above us.

"Here 'tis," he puffed. "Leastwise, here 'twas."

We were fronting now the semblance of a dug-out cellar such as I had seen in Kentucky and Ohio hillsides; and this an ancient cellar, for earth and rock had drifted over it in degree almost to conceal its face, sod and cedars thrived atop where, well back, a dip of the surface betrayed the onward limits, and here at the former entrance the earth had washed for a slight hollow like a pit.

"The mine?" I hazarded.

"The tunnel; and closed tighter 'n a beaver trap. Pshaw! Without proper tools——! If the timbering's been crushed in, twenty peones might not clear passage in a month's time."

The señorita called.

"Have you found it?"

Our eyes met. He queried me, I queried him.

"Yes, or sign of it."

She came. She had discarded the thick smothering serape and simply approached us in the loose cotton pantaloons and blouse-like shirt of the common class, her little feet encased in cumbersome brogans.

"Where?"

"Here, señorita."

"Madre de Dios! There is no opening? It is useless to you?"

I felt my comrade's swift glance. Again we were in accord.

"Just a natural drift, señorita. Pick and shovel will soon do the work."

"But you have no pick and shovel. The burros! We should get the burros. You have nothing at all, not even panniers."

"Tools and burros, and men, too, will be an easy matter," he assured. "First we'll scout about a trifle. We can accomplish little more to-day, anyhow."

"You are satisfied? You can open the mine?" she pressed anxiously, from me to him, and back.

"Yes; indeed yes," we responded together. "Why not?"

She accepted, more content.

"Then thanks to God. It is yours. It is very rich, my father says. You will have millions—who knows? But if you had been disappointed I should have died."

"But for you we never should have found it," I encouraged.

"Main thing to do now is to make camp," the Long American crisply directed. "Sun's going to set early

in here. We got to forage for meat and water. If ——"

"We'll be safe, you think, Don Juan?" she asked.

He laughed easily.

"Safer than if we were in Santa Fé, señorita. We can fort this place against a hundred Antonios; and as for Injuns—they'll think considerable before coming in where that skeleton's lying and ghosts walk. Blood's been spilled and lives 've been snuffed out hereabouts, time to time, and it's bad medicine, I'll bet."

She shuddered and crossed herself.

"True, señor. And you are not afraid to stay?"

He tapped his rifle stock.

"Not with this, as answer to the flesh and blood; and not with you, to charm the evil spirits into good ones. Hey, compañero?"

"Surely," said I. "We're well fixed."

"And water? There should be a spring," she faltered. "I told you of a spring ——"

"Hark ye! I hear it." And he strode away. Partly down the slope from the portal of the tunnel a trickle oozed as if from a spring choked above, and by course of miniature curvets and glissades dropped for the short distance to the bottom land. We might interpret its course there by a thread of green, and a copse of aspens already yellowed by the frosts.

"Meat should be yonder, by evening," said he to me, at the spring. "Deer should come in. I'll go on down, presently."

"How'll they come in?" I questioned.

He shot me a look.

"The same way we'll be going out, for we'll not go out by that gate. I want only to find their trail. We can haul our animals up, somehow."

"And where then?"

"To the Arkansaw, quick as we can make it. The trail by Santa Fé is closed; you can depend on that. The mine's worthless to us as we are; we've no tools nor pack critters—thanks to that wild girl of yours; so we got to get out pronto. I wouldn't be corralled in here, with her as bait; not unless I see more gold than I have yet. No; we'll get out and come back better primed, if we come at all."

"I know," I answered, troubled. "But she goes with me, or I go with her; mind that."

"She'll go with us," he declared. "What else can she do? You've won her, petticoat and all, what's of more value than the shirt. She'll go; never fear. You're her man."

We scooped out a drinking pool. I made shift to bear across to her some water in my hat, and thus save her steps. After the riding and the spying about it now was well past noon. The sun bid fair to sink early in a cloud bank to the west, above the basin rim. Therefore circumstances enjoined upon us to make camp ready and procure food.

We three returned by the brief interval along the gentle slope, of maybe twenty yards, to the spot where we had left the animals. By configuration and by shelter it seemed the best camping-place. I picketed my mule and hers, after watering them; the Long American sallied down with horse and gun to seek our

dinner and supper in one; and I remained to guard my sweetheart and attend to camp matters.

She watched me from her seat upon the blankets, under shield of her peón's cloak; occasionally replied to my forced chatter, her gaze ever following my movements. And there was something in the softening of her eyes, and a dewy wistfulness fleetingly unveiled in them, and an abstraction in her subdued voice, which stirred me strangely beyond the sheer thrill of heart's desire.

"You can open the mine?" she put.

"Assuredly, querida. As soon as possible."

"And Don Juan thinks so, too?"

"You heard him, dearest. It waits only upon men and tools."

And again:

"You are not disappointed, then?"

"In what, Rosa mía?"

"In the mine—in coming here?"

"No indeed. All is turning out well."

And again:

"You will be rich, muy amigo? You are happy?"

"We all shall be rich, dear one. I never was so happy in my life before."

"'Stá bien," she murmured in her own language. "I shall be happy, too. Better you should have the gold than Antonio have it. He does not need it."

She was silent, and I saw that she had sunk asleep, her cheek pillowed upon her arm. Treading cautiously I drew the cloak farther over her, and with the

sweet consciousness that her bosom rose and fell under my protection I proceeded about my work.

Toward sunset the Long American's rifle spoke, below and distant. In the evening flush he came toiling up out of the enpurpled bottoms, a butchered deer across his saddle. I met him on the outskirts of camp.

"All quiet?" he asked.

"Yes. She's asleep."

"Oh! She'll wake to eat, I'll wager. Even her mouth is made for something besides pretties. Here's meat; and I've found our trail out."

"You have?"

"Bet your life, hombre. It's at t'other side, yonder, and a heap straight up, in parts; but where deer can go we'll follow with horse and mule."

"To-morrow morning?"

"Certain. There's nothing to stay for as accommodation, and that rifle shot's liable to spur trouble from one direction or another. For two men and a woman this proposition smells like a trap, and I've got a queer sort of feeling which says to pull out while we can. The mine's not worth staking hair and hide on—not yet."

"Yes, I know perfectly well," said I. "But she doesn't know. So not a word of that to her."

"Never a peep. We may come back, and we mayn't; creo que sí, creo que no—perhaps, and perhaps not. Once you get her out of the country you'll be content with your own lodge fire for a spell. Muy bueno. We can't all have luck on the trail, and I'm

agreed. Let's to meat before dark. You'd best wake your señorita."

However, she was awake, sitting up, gazing about startled until she saw our presence.

"Cómo 'stá, señorita? Va bien?"

At this his jovial hail, "How are you? Doing well?" she smiled.

"Me va bien, señor." Then with subtle appeal, at me: "I was asleep and dreaming. I did not know you had gone. What is it—a deer?"

"Yes, for our supper. Are you hungry?"

"Naturalmente, my dear sir," she laughed. "It has been many hours since early morning."

"And a longer time since we crossed the Arkansaw," my companion muttered. "I only hope we'll be quicker getting back."

The basin was lapped all in royal swathing whose tenuous fringes crept half-way up our slope; the cliff ramparts behind us were deeply shadowed, the cliffs of the opposite rim glowed ruddily and the mountain crests beyond and to the south gleamed hard and cold in the full sun still, when beside our fire we three made rude but cordial meal, this evening, upon saltless strips of venison roasted in the blaze—a meal, nevertheless, not more rude than those meals of the Santa Fé Trail when buffalo were on hand. Yet it struck me that my sweetheart's sprightliness was in a measure forced, as if to conceal her true feelings—feelings, no doubt, of weariness, anxiety and discomfort; not, I fervently prayed, of regret. On the whole, I was at a nervous pitch, myself, desirous mainly that

the night pass, that the morrow come in peace, and that we ride safely out, she innocent of heart pain, for the freedom of that less debatable, at least less bigoted land beyond the boundary Arkansas.

We arranged rough bed for her, but our best. From her covers she gave me her hand.

"Buenas noches, Ricardo mío."

"And to you muy buenas noches and pleasant dreams," I responded.

She detained me for an instant, clear-eyed, scanning my face.

"Hasta luego; no hay más que—till the next time; there is nothing besides," she said.

"So then until to-morrow—con que hasta mañana," I responded again, in the Spanish; and I kissed the little hand, with a choke in my throat, for all this was so wonderful.

We two men spread our own beds, properly removed from her, and settled to sleep.

"No guard to-night, by thunder," the Long American mumbled. "Injuns attack only by daylight; that's one good thing about 'em. And I've seen no sign of ary red hide slinking near. I'll wager they fight mighty shy of these precincts. By all trace nobody's been in here for fifty years. As for those people from the north, they'll have little stomach to try the game, either, with us at their front and the Comanches likely on their backs. Between American and Spaniard the Injun'll choose the dons' hair every time. It's an old feud. Yep," he continued, "if that mine were open I've a notion we could sample it well and get away

handily. 'Tis a pity—here we are ——" and he grumbled, peevish. "At any rate, we'll have our rest, unless the ghosts walk. So good-night to you."

I heard him still muttering disconsolately in his buffalo robe, but I think that we all speedily fell asleep. I awakened not until daybreak. For a moment I lay confusedly watching the eastern sky redden. Then I recollected. The events of the past day rushed upon me; the nearer events of the present day becked impatient of neglect. We might be losing precious time. At that I raised upon an elbow and sought for the couch of the señorita. The pallet was disarranged and empty.

This sharpened me at once; but I reassured myself. She had modestly stirred abroad betimes, to make fitting toilet; might be at the spring, might indeed be strolling to relieve her limbs. We were, after all, two graceless men and she was a girl reared to delicacy. With disinclination to intrude upon her I listened in hope of marking her whereabouts. Amidst the twitter of birds I heard a sound—a medley of sound—a thumping and slithering and grunting, and series of exclamations distinctly masculine, from the direction of the mine.

The bed of the Long American also was empty. He was up, and up to something radical. I was the only sluggard. Thereupon I left my sweetheart to her own devices, perchance her orisons, and hastily went to investigate the travail yonder.

CHAPTER XIII

WE FIND AND LOSE

A BURSTING noise quickened my steps—a bursting and a rattling, and grunting recurrent. And when I arrived, there where the barrier of drifted earth had interposed, sealing the tunnel mouth, now yawned a black hole, with the Long American, grimy, sweating, and rubbing his eyes, standing aside, a stout cedar pole poised as if for another ramming blow when the débris should have settled.

He heard me; turned and gleefully grinned.

"Qué tal, compañero?" he greeted. "By the powers! I scored center this time. I've opened her in-'ards. See? Hooray!"

"The tunnel!" I gasped, in astonishment, in vexation, a mingling of both. Complications loomed; my predominant idea was to get away. "How did it happen? I thought you had given up. You said nothing."

"No," he beamed; "but I got to thinking a heap. It bothered me all night. Seemed like a burning pity to turn our backs on treasure without a good try. You can't tell what lies under ground, without using muscle. And I had a dream—I dreampt gold, I say—gold in sacks and you and I in amongst and pawing 'em over. In my dream this tunnel mouth was covered by a blan-

ket of slide thin as your Independence charity and waiting to be proved. So I rolled out early while you and your señorita were snoring; and I'd been clawing and rooting like a badger after a prairie dog till I found this pole; then I rammed and pried at a weak spot, and I picked the lock. Looks like a whole rotted door had given way. See here?"

He thrust the pole in, ten feet of length, and encountered nothing. By stabbing and kicking and pawing—and I could do no less than help—we enlarged the opening. The loose earth dislodged easily; we plucked rotted splinters, pieces of plank from what evidently had been a pine door or bulwark; warm air wafted in, dank air wafted out. But the interior was black and abysmal.

We paused, winded. We peered in; mystery, silent as death, ominous as a brooding thunder head, provocative as a forbidden Bluebeard chamber, baffled us. There was no gleam of yellow; for the faintly lighted space of a yard, maybe, we might see earthen wall and hard-packed floor and ceiling of sagged cedar poles; then the vista faded. My partner sniffed, experimentally.

"No use standing here making medicine. The hole won't turn inside out, to order. Bye-bye. Let's take what the ghosts have to offer flesh and blood."

With that, carrying his rifle, he stooped and boldly entered. He sniffed again.

"Stinkish," he remarked. "But plain dry rot and not pizen. I've breathed worse in an Injun council under cover."

He disappeared, groping, and I called after.

"Can you see? Do you want a lucifer?" For all the way from Independence I had saved a water-proof package of phosphorous friction matches.

His voice responded hollowly.

"Nope. I've cat's eyes, on occasion."

He receded. Then I heard muffled exclamation, the striking of steel, presently I caught a glow—curiosity spurred by his ejaculated summons, "Hi, compañero! Come here!" dragged me also in by the scruff of the neck.

The tunnel, square cut and high enough for a man to stand upright, turned with a shoulder that cut off the source of the glow until, rounding by a passage, I witnessed him limned infernal, holding a short thick candle and gazing agawk. An odd spectacle he made, too, his great hat brushing the scaly roof, his lengthy bulk capering in shadows blown about by the slight draught; but that spectacle which had arrested him was odder.

Another gaunt form, this in gyves connecting bones of wrists and ankles by a chain to the wall itself, was propped—well-nigh plastered—in an angle; and at its feet there appeared to be a sack of collapsed wrinkled hide like a couchant cave beast. The visage of the mummy grimaced flatly; a wisp or two of coarse black hair hung over its parchment forehead. The thing, I vow, was demoniac, and took one all aback.

But the Long American, candle to the fore, viewed it casually, and I came on with breath, however (I do not deny), immoderately rapid.

In truth, alive as I was to the prankish aspects of the

business, I stopped short with thrill from apprehension of God knows what when on a sudden he reached with his rifle barrel and poked the hideous prodigy much as some old woman would poke a waxworks figure with her umbrella in a museum.

It rattled and swayed remonstrant, and clung to its fastness.

"Humph!" he quoth. "The Old Nick's sentinel, but can't scare a white man. Too dead for that. I've seen Injun medicine-man who looked heaper. Blamed if it didn't give me a turn, though, when I run plumb against it and brushed noses. Wagh! Then I lighted up and sighted this candle stuck in a cranny, and with holy candle you can fight the devil anywhere. You bet! What's in that sack, you reckon, now?"

His eyes gleamed at me underneath their bushy brows.

"Quién sabe?" I stammered.

"Sabe your granny," he growled. "Ore, else I'll engage to eat dog the rest of my life. Ore, by Jupiter! I feel the yellow of it. You hold this candle."

He palmed the light upon me and scarcely able to contain his hopes, he whipped out his knife, he flung himself upon the sack, and slashed wickedly, oblivious of the wizened feet and their clanking iron disturbed by his rudeness. He ripped the sack—the hide parted and gaped, he tore the slit wider and fished out a pawful of the contents.

Only for a moment he pored greedily, fair to mouth the dull sheen. Rising, he whooped stentorian, so that the candle flared.

"Gold, boy! Simon pure—or mighty nigh it. Why, we're going to be richer'n a Pawnee prize hoss-thief! There's a virgin vein and well tapped, too, back in, didn't the old don say? Didn't he say he took some and left more? Whoopee! It'd make a man dance Injun. We'll follow sign. This isn't the only sack. Heft it; stick in your fist. How about?"

"But we can't stay! We can't stay," I heard myself protesting in strange voice. His elation transferred to me was shorn of its briskness; it only rasped unpleasantly, and the sop of mere gold appeared a pitiful bribe to delay freedom for me and my sweetheart together. "We must get out at once."

He stared.

"Get out? Surely. But we'll get out well paid. We've our fingers in the pot."

"We can come back," I pleaded.

"No, and yes," he answered. "A bird in the hand, remember. By thunder, this sack is only a sign. There'll be more further in. Do you think I'll leave it all for the dons? It was given to us; we have the map and the grant ——"

"And we have the señorita, too, bear in mind," said I.

He straightened into fury.

"Oh, your señorita! Confound woman! They always turn a man white livered, specially the pretty ones. Do you stand by me who picked you off the ground at Independence, lined your belly, put you in way of health and of lining your pockets, too; or do you cock your tail at fortune when she smiles, and

throw dirt in her very face in order to play lap dog to a foreign wench dowered with mainly trouble? Better had she stayed free in Santa Fé and let you free on the trail. With money you can accomplish anything."

"What do you want to do, then?" I desperately urged. "Stop here and be trapped, all of us?"

"I'll risk that," said he. "They haven't come yet. At the worst you can surrender the girl ——"

"Never!" I blurted. "Or only with my life."

"Well, then," said he, "you've an enemy in the old don as well as in the young one, you've all Mexico against us; and by the powers we can stand off all Mexico here for a time and get double pay. We can't come back in. If with our two rifles we can't make 'em cry quits and give us open trail with what we can carry, at least we'll go forth no poorer than we entered. I tell you, when they see the mine located and opened, that'll place the matter under different complexion, and they'll be willing to talk. We've a chance to give 'em the slip, anyhow."

"How long do you propose, then?" I demanded. I owed him much; that was certain. He likewise should be the gainer. 'Twas to this very end that he had succored me.

"Till noon, till noon. I'll stay here till noon, in the flesh, even if I have to join the ghosts for it afterward. That'll 'low us time enough to explore in back, pack our critters with the best, and make out afoot to some snuggery that'll afford sanctum till I can buy, beg or steal other animals to straddle."

"All right," I assented, rather sullenly—for the ob-

stinate nature of him rose like a wall. "I'll tell the señorita." I passed him the candle.

"Tell her," he granted. "If she loves you she'll stick to you, come peace, come war. While you're breakfasting I'll make one little reconnoiter to spy on the trail in; and then I'll eat as I work. Why," said he, as I hastened out, "we mebbe can tap this hole again and again. We're white; and there are powerful few others, red or yellow, who'll tackle ghost country. This mummy was left here for a purpose."

Gladly enough I emerged from the tunnel and the stench of that tallow smoke which was ripe incense to the ghastly guardian. There death still lurked; but life scintillated bright and vibrant and warming here outside.

The sun was up; our work and controversy had covered longer space than I had realized. And while I stepped eagerly, heart calling, my dudgeon at the Long American already of the past and my future rich with one treasure, come peace, come war (as he had said), a quick wave of cataclysmic alarm suddenly doused me cold. It rushed upon me from out that utter quiet, again.

When I had crossed into sight of the night's camp close at hand I did not glimpse her. She was not at ease as I had anticipated; she was nowhere in view—the camp lay untenanted just as I had left it, and all the slope and basin rested inert, outspread to the sunshine and the blue dome, basking breathless, moveless, lifeless save for our grazing animals.

She might be awaiting our pleasure, in nook of sun

or shade; she may have shrunk from near approach to the mine; she—but I was mad to know. I ran to the camp. Her bed was as before, tumbled as if hastily vacated. She had not been back to it. And then I saw that which had escaped my earlier glance when I had thought her but briefly absent. It was a bit of paper fastened to a blanket. With heart thumping I read the words scrawled as by black-lead in a dim light.

"RICARDO:

"I go to my father. Do not follow. God keep you. "R."

I rushed to the picketed animals. Her mule was gone, although the saddles all lay as when last deposited. How had she been enabled to steal away in that fashion? How long had she been in flight? How far, now? What cursed sluggard—what meticulously blinded dummy I had been! But I would follow her even into Santa Fé, yes, into her father's house itself.

"Qué es?" The Long American queried down to me, on his way from the mine.

"She is gone! The señorita! Good-bye."

"What! Where?" He stopped mid-stride and stretched his lean neck.

"Back out. She left a note." I gathered my robe and seized saddle and bridle. "I'm off."

"What do you mean?" He came on.

"To find her. I'll not lose her."

"You'll blunder into a jackal pack," he warned. "Let her go. It'll be the marriage or the convent for

her, and the jail for you. You'll have to let her go."

I replied not. At the instant, while I was struggling with my mule—the brute high-headed and clenched teethed, and my fingers thumbs—a voice hailed us in Spanish, sounding clearly through the thin air.

"What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER XIV

WE FACE DISASTER

THE hail had broken so startlingly upon us, catching us at loose ends when we should have been girded circumspect! The mine, and now the señorita, had possessed us—we were the sport of fortune, not the wards.

One glance sufficed.

"'Pache!" And whirling, the Long American dived, frog-like, for shelter of a rock. I dropped the bridle; found myself somehow at the opposite side of my mule, my Hawken leveled across her back.

Vividly outlined upon a low craggy ridge overlooking us there stood, erect and composed, his arms folded upon his gun, a tall Indian naked to the breech-clout, moccasins and feather in his braids. By trick of memory exotic and yet persistent I was transplanted in a breath to an art gallery back home where, years before, I had seen his very image in a painting by—I don't know; by the Western artists, Catlin or Stanley, or perhaps an Arab sketch simulating the pose.

"'Pache! Don't shoot! Don't shoot till I give word," the Long American besought. "This looks like case o' palaver or hair. 'Tain't Comanche. 'Pache is hoss of different color."

I fancied a slight smile, as at our manifest alarm, upon the stern features of the savage; yet he appeared

to move never a muscle. He hailed again; and with the words lifted his hand in the talk sign.

"What are you doing here, American dogs?"

"Lemme talk to him," muttered the Long American. "And you keep your eyes peeled. He's not alone." And he answered: "We are hunting. We needed meat. Pretty soon we march on with our company."

"That is a lie," the Indian rebuked. More insolence never was packed into four words. "You have no company. You are only three. Where is the third?"

I heard the Long American choking with spleen, but for a wonder he contained himself. I say for a wonder; that, however, is doing him injustice. He could meet Indian with Indian, on demand.

"Tell me I lie, you copper-bottomed imp? I've notion to let truth into you with a lead auger," he growled. But he replied: "There is no third. We are two and the others are within short march."

"You talk like a fool," the savage derided. "What is that third saddle for?" He had sharp eyes at that distance.

"It belonged to a led horse for packing meat.

"Do two of you sleep in three beds?" the savage contemptuously pursued—and my friend swore under breath. A chill permeated me. The señorita! My señorita, my Rosa! Was she safe? If so, thank God, and again thank God that she had gone. If not ——!

"Do you think we have no eyes, I and my young men?" accused the Indian. "Three of you came in;

the trail is plain. It was made yesterday. I know you for Americans. Only Americans would dare to camp like fools among the spirits, on medicine ground. Where is the third fool?"

"You're smart, hey?" grumbled the Long American. "Gosh, but I got a bullet itching to kiss your greasy hide for a thank 'ee!" He replied again: "We had a third man. He has gone to bring the rest of the company."

"How many?"

"One hundred trappers."

"From Santa Fé?"

"No." And he said, aside, to me, in English, "We mustn't have 'em watching that trail, with her on it." He added, for the Indian, "From the west."

The Apache retorted in level scorn.

"How could a hundred whites travel from the west without my knowing it? You talk crooked. You said they are near. You lied. No smokes have told me of any white trappers. Now you say the third dog has gone. Where? No matter. You will never see him again. We have one Spanish dog already. Is he yours? Your company is only Spanish. Bah!" And the fellow spat. "You will never see them again, either."

"What Spanish?" the Long American queried quickly.

"On the trail from Santa Fé. They are dead."

"So? We do not know them. But we heard no gunshots."

"We kill the Spanish with clubs," scoffed the In-

dian. "And as for you—look!" He flung out his hand. "You we will give to the women."

Guided by his gesture we might see the basin below sprung to horsemen as miraculously as the Highland bracken bristled in Sir Walter Scott's Lady of the Lake. A fanfare of shrill yells swept up to us. That I had been neglectful of duty while intent upon the conversation did not matter. Here we were. And my thoughts flew to the señorita. She was making for Santa Fé; the savages had mustered, the trail (according to this chief) was red, the party from the ciudad had been dispersed—how far had she gone? What could she do? Did she know, did she know? And would she turn, would she keep on, would she secrete herself and wait and pray ——? There are agonies of mind passing expression by words; and when I raised again the fearful concept of that tender girl beset by hideous portents—perhaps essaying frantic circuit, perhaps cowering among rocks and brush, perhaps now at bay and facing worse than death—I endured throes such as few men of my age experience.

Yet I endured them, here behind my mule, my rifle still presented, and the hoots of the Apaches shattering the last illusion of hope. The Long American was speaking to me.

"We must hold 'em off by talk or fight. That's her chance. Fracas occurred yesterday. If they don't pick up her trail—but we won't let 'em. We'll occupy 'em. Kill that chief first. Leave the others to me."

I understood very well, and thanked him with a gulp of gratitude. It was to me a little thing that I should

cover her safety with my own life; but that my friend and patron should so unhesitantly propose a mutual rôle, we two for one who really was nothing to him except an encumbrance ——

Brief time had passed since the chief's gesture and the answering yell. Thoughts are so swift and much may happen in a moment's dream.

"What do you wish?" the Long American questioned. I continued to watch the chief, and as with sixth sense I seemed to be watching the other Indians also, as they spread in their course. "Do you fight Americans?"

"You have lied. You are here to steal. You have opened the ground. I will talk no more. You must give yourselves up and we shall see."

About the savage there was a calm power and a dignity of address. He may have been playing for time; certainly we were, with opposing design and necessity of maintaining testy balance. What with the shouts and the sights my mule was growing restive again. The Long American sharply murmured:

"Keep your bead! I'll give word; then reload while I split those other devils." And he called, "Stop your men. We are no Spanish. We are Americans. Let us talk together."

I waited only the word. In the face of my muzzle the chief betrayed not a token of dis-ease. He replied:

"You are white. We have another white dog, your friend. If you fight, he dies."

"The Spaniard?"

"Yes."

"The Spaniards are no friends of ours," laughed my partner. "You may have him. An old man?"

"A young man."

"That is good. Of Santa Fé?"

"Of Santa Fé. A caballero and a rico."

"Muy bueno—very good. We do not know him."

"You lie. He is your friend. He calls himself Don Antonio."

I started as at a dagger prick. No exultation followed. The Long American was responding evenly.

"The caballero is nothing to us." And he hissed, "Hold tight."

"I must shoot?"

"Yes, yes. Double reason now. It's his death warrant. That settles your score too. There's a trick. I trust neither red nor yellow. He was leading another pack on our trail; like as not he's fetched this one in lieu."

"But the—his cousin! He'd not ——?"

"He's mad, plumb mad. He thinks her here. 'Tis he and she go free for ransom and we dance for the squaws."

I surely had no reason beyond mere humanity to favor Don Antonio; I should steel myself and think of Rosa. Don Antonio should pay, the Long American should pay, I was glad to pay, if by that winning safety for her. Don Antonio could not keep his bargain if any; for he could not deliver. She was gone, we would fight. Heaven knows that even in this I felt no sweetness of revenge upon an enemy; toward the don I was all impersonal, and I indeed wished that he were

not in the reckoning. My finger gently sought trigger, the sight of the Hawken steadied again upon the broad chest of the chief and just cut a paint pattern.

I did not hear the releasing word; I heard instead a cautionary explosive "Wait!"; the chief had beckoned into the distance, the Long American was squinting sunwards, and I looked.

Two mounted Indians were cantering from the nearest group, a Spanish figure upon horse between them. They halted within easy speech; Don Antonio, apparently scatheless, called to us.

"Hola!"

"Hola! What is it?" The Long American's challenge was terse.

"Surrender yourselves, señores, for the love of God. Surrender to ransom."

"Ransom, eh?" My partner laughed. "Oh, no! On whose word?"

"Mine, señores. It is arranged. I swear it. Only yield without fighting. You cannot escape. In the name of God come out and all will be well."

I marked Antonio crane and pry; saw the agony on his face; read the fear and the eagerness. The Long American laughed again.

"Go back with your Indians, you Spanish whelp. We talk with the chief."

"What would you do?" Don Antonio appealed. "Oh, santo Dios! You stay, you are lost—all of you. All of you, señores! And I shall die by torture. I am captive. You see me here. Listen to me, señores. I can promise you good treatment. They do not wish

war, these Indians. They will accept payment. Where is the other? It is arranged for the four of us."

Under breath the Long American cursed him roundly for the slip.

"You speak of four. There are only we two Americans and you Spaniard. You make your bed alone. Go back with your Indians and keep your bargain if you can. We will do our own business."

The don's voice rose almost to a scream.

"The torture, señores! It will be I to the death; and you—to the death, and worse. You are only three ——"

"Two," corrected the Long American. "You see two; two we are."

There was a shout—a bawl: "I come!" The don had launched himself from between his guards, he was bolting, low upon his horse, pistol drawn and face turned behind him; and so suddenly had he achieved that he was well in the clear before the two savages gained full stride after, whooping keenly, lance swaying and arrow strung. Right for us he spurred, upon horse fear-inspired.

The chief, I barely noted, had vanished with a mighty backward leap. The Long American exclaimed, but I shifted rifle muzzle, caught quick aim, the Hawken cracked viciously and the foremost pursuer threw up his arm, his arrow sped high, and he toppled like an emptied sack.

"You've done it!" They were words censorious. "Load. Seek cover."

The second Indian, lance couched, veered aside and

flattening in the saddle, scoured with wide circle; at a rush snatched his comrade from the ground and was away again. All the sunny air shuttled to the angry cries. Don Antonio galloped in and plunged to sod.

"Where is she? My Rosa?" he panted, his eyes searching.

"Gone. On her way home."

"You say ——?"

"Early this morning."

He glared incredulous.

"Caramba! No! You let her?"

"We learned of it too late, Don Antonio," said I.

"And you stayed here—you two Americans!" I thought that he would have remounted forthwith and sallied. He looked to his horse, he made hasty step. "Nombre de Dios!"

"Would you lead the Indians upon her trail, fool?" the Long American rebuked. "She may be nicely within reach of Santa Fé by now. Go back to your bargain. You will be welcomed. They are calling you."

The don whitened and staggered; he sank down. Then he spoke composedly.

"I had pledged everything for your surrender, señores. They know I am a rico. I was willing to be kept as hostage. But if she is outside on her way, may God and Mary protect her. I have my pistola and I will fight. Let us hold them as long as we can."

He examined his priming, and I began to think better of Don Antonio.

We all secured our animals and ourselves as best we

could, the Long American directing. We had meat, were within the zone of water, and might retreat to the mine mouth, but that only as a last resort. We faced in three directions, the don having the shortest radius, by reason of his pistol.

The sun was fully into the higher blue; the basin, fervid under his broad autumnal rays, had lapsed into false peace. The Indians were gathered in council. But blood had been shed; my impromptu bullet, I was quite aware, had invited our fate, and I did not need the Long American's grim congratulation: "You dumped the apple cart with that shot, compañero. But just as well. Only, a second more and we'd had the chief instead."

So we briefly waited; and as counterpoise to the strain of delay I had the comforting sense that maybe every moment was putting the señorita farther and farther upon her homeward way. We three (God grant!) were fighting the rear guard action, in post of honor.

The council broke with a blast of yells. The savages scurried hither and thither, as if preparing a charge to test us out. Then, nerved for the mêlée to focus, hearing the Long American's "Don't waste a shot. We can outreach 'em," and cautioning myself with that same caution, hoping only to play a game of time, I witnessed every Indian halt pony and turn in saddle, responsive to another burst of whoops.

It was a new volume of utterances fierce and exultant beyond imagining, from a party of reinforce-

ments. The notes appalled with their gleeful import. The Long American sprang half up to gaze.

"Goose is cooked," he rasped. "They've got the girl." The dictum rang as imperative as the crack of doom.

Antonio cried out in frenzy. She filled all my horizon: she, figure unmistakable upon her mule, herded on at a gallop in the midst of her rejoicing captors. The sharpened vista danced sickeningly. Antonio ran for his horse.

"To the rescue!" he screamed; and called upon the saints.

"Wait!" bade the Long American. "We will do what we can." And in English, to me: "Stiffen your upper lip. We'll have to knuckle under. Comanches would be worse. With 'Paches we have a show, as Americans."

In this there was truth. The bitter war between the Americans and the Apaches had not yet flamed blood red, the Apaches being somewhat removed from intercourse with the north and east. But alas, the lances of all the Southwest tribes were in tilt against the Spaniard; and what could we two Americans avail and what could Antonio avail now that we had taken an Apache life and a girl—a girl such as she!—was the spoil of those foraging wolves?

CHAPTER XV

FOR THE SAKE OF THE SEÑORITA

THE yells below subsided as the second party joined the first and seemed to be reporting. Erect, the Long American mused captiously, conning the situation over and weighing odds.

"That's hard luck. We might have fought 'em off —might not. At worst we could have lost our hair. Now the fat's in the fire. They'll not quit us. They'll send her out, like as not, to the keeping of the squaws, but there'll be plenty of the devils to ring our little corral here. They'd reason before—we're stealing their gold, they say, and violating medicine ground besides. And they've double reason now; they've lost a warrior and that score has got to be settled, blood for blood."

"Let us attack them and die if need be," Don Antonio interrupted, straining for action. "We are men."

"Die! Did you come alone from Santa Fé, señor don?"

"The others turned back early. Cowards! This is Indian country. I did not turn back; I am her cousin and promised husband. They captured me."

"And you led them here, eh?"

"No, no. They had found your trail. But it was

for her that I bargained, only they did not know she was a woman. I was to give them money, goods, anything."

"Do you expect help still from Santa Fé?"

"Yes, yes. God will send it."

"It would bring utter ruin, then. At first sign of attack they would so dispose of her that death would be better, if death it wasn't."

Antonio voiced eagerness.

"I will go down to them. I am not afraid. I will go down to them and talk."

He leaped for his horse; I sprang with intent matching. He should not outface me. She was mine. Shame on me to let him be intercessor! And, moreover, distrust of him suddenly stabbed me.

The command of our captain crackled warning.

"Not much! I do the bargaining now for all concerned, señor don. And you ride with us or you will ride nowhere. You will stay here with the ghosts that Don Isidro left; a happy family." He added in English, for me: "Watch him. Don't trust him. We'll go together when we go. As between red and yellow I prefer to play the red, in this game, until I read his hand."

He strode to his horse, bridled with a loop, swung aboard and mounted bareback advanced at a walk, signing for a talk. The chief confidently came to meet him. At the foot of the slope they spoke across proper interval; with Don Antonio, breathing hard, and I perhaps as feverish while trying to watch him and them and her, waiting here in leash.

The conference ended. The chief turned for his band; the Long American rode up to us.

"It's an Injun truce," he announced. "Saddle up, compañero. We go down. They'll powwow on us. We've killed a young buck, which can't be denied; and we've dug in ghost soil and the medicine'll have to be consulted. But there's the girl—confound all petticoats of any color!—and by shortening distance mebbe something'll happen favorable to the combination. We can't work from outside in. Fighting 'em off wouldn't help her, now. Whether we can work from inside out, I don't know. Such miracles have hatched. But we live till to-morrow; and those are the terms. I câched map and paper," he said more rapidly, "in a hole under rock where I first forted. We'll be back."

He informed the don, who alertly mounted. I saddled, he saddled and led forth for the enemy, the don and I carefully side by side at his horse's flanks.

A great hullaballoo dinned at us from the Apaches, clustered and awaiting. I saw only the Señorita Rosa's form and face—her lithe form, weary and adroop, peón clad, her haggard face with eyes blazing agony and apprehension, yes, and (I felt) love into mine; I heard quick cry, "Rosa! Rosa mía! Here I am!" and sensed Don Antonio dash forward; my mule answered heel and darted even with him; mindless of the Long American's angry shout we raced together, for I could not yield place.

But the savages, jostling partly in alarm, partly in astonishment, met us with jeers and scowls and line impenetrable; then lance points and bent bows forced

us from her, till we recoiled to the arrival of our captain.

"Are you crazy? Are you children, you two?" he berated. "By heaven, you must like to wear your scalps loose. I thought better of you, anyhow," he scolded, of me. "After this, show nothing how you feel, or she's lost as well as yourself."

The Indians closed about us; hustled us on, in their fore, with the señorita's guard following. At smart pace, crossing southward, we rode the length of the basin; by an unsuspected little pass through the rock rim here we made exit into another, smaller basin, and approached a camp at the farther end.

At least, thin smoke scarcely discernible against the blue sky and brown crags spiraled upward into the light air; dogs distantly yapped; the ponies pricked their ears and jogged faster.

"I'd have eaten snake before ever I'd have fired gun at deer, if I'd smelt inkling of this neighborhood," the Long American muttered.

From our cavalcade several vain youths now dashed forward like couriers, to be received with acclamations high-keyed and prolonged. The main body of the column proceeded slowly, into the jaws of the wolfish curs and the very arms of a few screeching old women.

But when the corpse of the warrior was discovered the notes, even of the dogs, changed. The women's triumphant jubilee became a jangle of wails and imprecations—hags, matrons and children howled to get at us with sticks, stones and knives. Armored by the Long American's sharp "Sit tight! Let 'em blow!"

sit we did, in the buffer ring of warriors and dependent upon disposition by the chief.

I looked to the señorita. What a place for her! Our glances mingled; she had too much wit to betray herself; she had straightened in her seat and from me her eyes passed on, proudly ignoring the infernal scum which was nearer the bestial than the human. But her face was white and drawn and I might see the veins of her slim neck throb.

The camp was mean and squalid; of low huts constructed from boughs and skin coverings loosely laid upon them; with one large tent or wigwam—lodge, in the language of the prairies—of cowhide paint-daubed but dingily weathered, and another, smaller, with a robe spread before it: all fronting a little stream, willow-bordered, along which, below, a herd of ponies dozed or cropped the bunchy coarse grasses. In the south saw-tooth pinnacles uplifted, the tips of some of them seamed with snow. I saw not much hope in that direction, for the country appeared to be wilder yet and inaccessible.

The flaps of the large lodge opened; from between them there issued death embodied in a creation so hideous that the skin of my spine prickled like the raised bristles of a dog. I heard Don Antonio's explosive "Santísima!" and the poignant gasp of the girl. Only the Long American sat as unmoved, save for his dry comment, in English, "The devil incarnate, sure enough."

The prodigy was an old man—an extremely old man, his naked hide withered until it fell in folds over

his flabby paunch; the flesh of him shriveled to ribs and scrawny limbs, his shrunken arms like pipe-stems and his legs crooked and straddled. Upon his head he wore a sort of casque of shaggy buffalo pelt surmounted by a pair of curving buffalo horns—and this lent an appalling air to the deeply scarred, wrinkle-meshed mat of a face further graved by cunning and passion, by that slit of a tightly lipped mouth, and by his tiny bright eyes peeping from the convolutions of his skin. It was a face essentially evil.

In his head-piece, his filthy string of a breech-clout, waddling barefoot like an ape and aided by a staff, he advanced.

"Medicine-man," the Long American mumbled. "Drat his mangy carcass."

He leaned upon his staff, to survey us. The tumult had hushed, as by fear. Fear enveloped him, clothed him, accompanied him, emanated from him. The Indians hung upon his every movement. And although I tried to shut him out, and to block his gaze with look impassive, I could feel his eyes boring through and through. God pity the señorita, exposed to that search!

"You'll know us next time, old fellow," called the Long American. "Bueno?"

The medicine-man uttered a single word to the chief; he turned about and toddled back to the lodge. Then pandemonium broke afresh; again the hags and the children threatened us. The chief spoke to us, with word and gesture ordering us to dismount. Rude hands grabbed our weapons and wrenched them from

us. Warriors cleared a lane; scorched on right and left and from behind by that fury of execrations renewed, dogs snapping at our heels, we three were conducted to a hut or hogan, and through the ferment in our wake I saw the señorita, stepping erectly, being led apart as if to the smaller of the lodges.

Stooping low we entered the sanctum such as it was —a conical hut, close and unsavory, in which we might sit but could not stand. Here we were left. The flap was dropped. The irritating chorus at the threshold soon died.

I was suddenly weak in the knees—afire within, to be sure, for projects, plans, action, anything that might set the señorita free even though at the ultimate sacrifice to us; but the brief respite was welcome. Don Antonio whimpered in Spanish, twisting his fingers with the frenzy of impotence till one would think that he had lost his mind. The Long American set us example by coolly ramming his pipe and lighting it. He puffed, jetting the smoke through his hairy nostrils.

"Well," he said, to the don, "no bueno. Our medicine is bad. You spoke of bargain? What have you?"

"Dios! The señorita! My Rosa! Mary help us, señores. We must rescue her. She shall not stay here in the hands of the barbarians. What is happening to her now? Virgen santísima! And we are men!"

"She is in the lodge of the chief. There'll be no harm done her. And here we are. They took our guns, of course. But what I do not like is the looks of

that old demon. He is the high priest, and bigger than the chief. You spoke of bargain, I say. Can you bargain against him? What?"

"Sabe Dios," Don Antonio groaned. He brightened. "But I will try, I will try, señores. I am a rico. I will go out and talk with the chief. If only you had not killed a warrior ——"

"His arrow would have been in your vitals," the Long American reproved tartly. "You can thank Don Ricardo for that shot—and a good shot."

"I thank you," the don granted, more suavely, to me. "I was mad. I was crazed when I saw only the two of you. I thought of her whom I am to marry. If I had stayed, then all might have been well. Now, ay de mí—alas, we are lost."

"For sake of 'your' señorita we two were prepared to surrender scalps. And for sake of 'your' señorita we have entered the wolf pack, have given up guns, and instead of dying fighting we are like to be toys for the squaws. Now do your possible, señor don. You made brag of some sort of a deal with the chief. It is time."

"I will go, I will go." He crawled through the opening. From without there volleyed instant cries, exclamations, merging into sounds of a struggle. The Long American faced me and grinned.

"Wants to see 'el capitán,' does he? Mebbe he will, mebbe he won't. I reckon the guise of that fourth prisoner doesn't fool the chief. Changes the complexion of the 'bargain.' Still, the don may have the right words."

"And what, then?" I asked. "Do you trust him now?"

"Trust him?" My friend spat. "Trust him! Yes, to save his own skin and hers, if he can. I believe he brought the rascals on us with that purpose. That's what I believe. You can be certain he had knowledge of our whereabouts. He was with a party, no doubt. Captured, too; possibly surrendered, to make his talk. But whatsoever he does, you can be sure we're in the price named, and good riddance for him. With you out of the way he has the girl."

"Never!" I blurted.

"Tut, tut! When does a Mexican girl marry a foreigner and heretic who's not a citizen? If she goes back, the priests will get after her—yes, church and state and family will force her to it. She can take choice between convent and home. But that's better than a 'Pache lodge, eh?"

"And we?" I queried, braced to farther hint of the inevitable.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We've given him rope. Let him try. If we've only ourselves to look out for, that simplifies matters. I've been in tight fixes before—I've twice been prisoner to the Injuns, and I've been staked out, and I've so nearly tasted fire that a regiment of soldiers wouldn't have spent powder to save my carcass. But here I am again. A man is never dead while his heart beats. Were these Comanche, or Kiowa, or those northern Blackfeet—but I've yet got to learn the 'Pache. Main trouble is, we've trespassed on their

medicine ground, and their medicine chief doesn't look over friendly. They'll say we were robbing them besides, though they've no use for gold, themselves. And we've spilled blood. All in all we'll either have to depend upon some stroke of luck or see our hair hung to lances. Take my word for it, we can't depend on any Don Antonio."

"You don't figure any chance of rescue?" I asked.

"For her? For ourselves? First crack of rifle—nay, the first alarm whoop from a lookout will likely fetch us arrow or lance pronto and stretch Don Antonio and the señorita too, if his negotiations aren't completed. That's Injun way. No, we've only our wits and spunk and faith in providence." He challenged me with sudden kindly glance. "You'd rather be in here, close to her, as it is, lad? Then you'll know what happens. She'll be better treated, mark you, than if we were at large. They don't fear the Spanish; else they'd be hustling her beyond white reach."

"Yes," said I. "I'm glad to be here if we could do no good from the outside."

"We'd be dead within twenty-four hours, and the whole village would howl at her," he asserted. "Now we've twenty-four hours, mebbe more, of leeway, if that arch villain the high priest doesn't overrule the chief. And twenty-four hours is time enough. I've seen the unexpected turn up in less."

"You have a plan?"

He shook his head.

"No more than you. I don't dare risk addling of

eggs, son. But something will happen. It always has, with me."

So I sat torn by a dozen insensate projects, none worth voicing. They whirled through my brain like prankish jesters displaying their pied wits, one succeeding another in mockery and each as nonsensical as its rivals. They beckoned me to seek out the chief myself; to plead with him; to rush forth, seize weapon and fight way to her; to force an issue that somehow should face the cards up and let us know exactly our status so that we might make best use of our flitting moments. And with all my desperation—in all my comparing what now was with that which briefly had been and which might again be if only the right course were chosen, I fidgeted and bit my lips and reviewed the dervish figments in vain. Such a hatred of that mine—almost a hatred of the Long American who had overborne my honest intent with his passion for rubbish, who had first inveigled me, then had used me, and at the last had bamboozled me still to his own ends when the sweetest cup of life was even at my lips and no mortal treasure in the world should have sufficed to delay it; such bitter hatred, I say, welled and stung, that I cursed to myself, over and over. And among not the least of my criminations was that which again and again accused me for my weakness in not insisting that she stay behind—in not declining utterly to proceed while she was with us. I should have withstood her with more decision, should have headed her, and should have finally escorted her back even into custody, into jail for myself but into safety for her.

The venture had been wild, wild, with such a start. She, too impulsive; I, too partial; and he—rough, to tell the truth, but right, at the first, and, after all, stanch under his roughness, to grapple shifty fortune in weal or woe. Thereupon I began to think better of him also, while continuing to think worse of myself.

He sat opposite, puffing his pipe, his eyes upon me, his ears evidently keen to tokens from outside. He spoke as if seeing my thoughts.

"No regrets," said he. "Regrets are like a charge of powder spent on a dead buffalo; they're like the popping at a mark by greenhorns when Injuns are close ahead. Load up, load up, and have a clean gun and a full flask. You can't recook yesterday, but you can toll to-morrow to pot, maybe."

In his mien and word there was again that heartiness which, as at Independence, steadied me like a drifting boat that finds holding ground off a lee shore.

Now that snarly hubbub recurred without. My comrade smiled knowingly. With quick approach Antonio entered the low doorway. He was somewhat flushed, as by vexation and haste.

"Dogs of infidels!" he denounced. "They insult a caballero whose very breath is soiled by speech with them." He reined his choler. "God help us, señores. We are in His hands."

"Yes, yes," growled the Long American. "But the devil has claws and far reach. He's patron saint hereabouts. You've told us the best, I fancy; tell us the worst."

"If you had not killed a warrior—if you had not

disturbed sacred ground, señores." And by thus putting the responsibility upon us he exasperated beyond due measure. "The chief will make no decision for all. I am very sorry, señores. But I am to be held here as hostage for the Señorita Rosa's ransom. I offered to pay with my life if she were returned safely to Santa Fé and ransom did not come. My life and fortune are at the chief's feet. I could do nothing for you—nothing. If you can ransom yourselves ——? Or escape?"

"Muchísimas gracias, señor don," replied the Long American. "You are indeed a caballero. And the señorita? She agreed?"

"You saw the Señorita Rosa?" I asked; perhaps too eagerly, for a shade inscrutable slightly darkened his face.

"Sí. She was present. She heard all. She saw me, her segundo and pledged husband. She knew that I had delivered myself to these barbarians. We shall be separated, but she will not fail me—not me, her cousin and the man of her family. No doubt," he smoothly added, "she will arrange for your rescue too. Or I can, later. You have American friends of means in Santa Fé?"

"We have American friends whose means are their rifles, señor don," answered the Long American. "There'll be a score to settle." He continued, in English, to me: "I mistrust him; I smell something off color. He may be lying, he may be speaking truth. I rather hope he is. The girl is the nubbin of the business. Get her away; that comes first."

"That comes first, certainly," I assented. "It surely comes first with him, too."

"Yep, not forgetting his own skin. But I give him credit for doing his possible, in her direction. These Spanish are no cowards among their women."

"And as he says, she'll be in position to help us also."

"Spanish help Spanish; family help family. I don't know what liberty she'll have, once she's housed again. O' course, if Stanley is still there, or other good Americans, and they're notified properly, they'll do their levelest, though that won't amount to much if we're on the ghost trail. And what's to hinder this gentleman from following after, when he's scot free, and telling that we're gone beaver?"

"He would not!" I gasped.

"It's woman, woman, always woman," quoth my partner. "With you out the way he'll marry her ——"

"But she loves me, Jack!" I cried. "I know she loves me. You've seen and heard; she came ——"

"'Tis a long step 'twixt love for a heretic and foreigner and marriage to him, lad," he advised persistent. "Could we get her out—then quién sabe? But you'd best give her up; tend to letting her go free and saving yourself. Like as not you could make a bargain on your own account, with the don. You might try him."

Revolt, scalding hot, surged through me.

"Never!" I protested. "Never, never! She shall go; I shall stay and rot before I'll surrender her in any bargain to him or any other man."

We had talked careless of the presence of the don. His black eyes traveled from face to face as if striving

to catch the gist of our discussion. Evidently he guessed the trend; he felt the suspicion and resentment, for he spoke.

"I swear it, señores. I myself will do what I can for you, later. I have told you the truth. The señorita shall go. Then at the will of God I shall go, and I shall not forget you."

"I'll wager he'll follow mighty close after her, too," remarked my partner. He replied to Don Antonio only with: "Bien. Let us say no more. The señorita shall be restored to safety, and we, as you say, are in the hands of God."

A shuffle sounded at the door; an ancient hag entered, bearing a steaming kettle and a gourd spoon. She plumped the kettle down, with a grunt, jabbed the spoon in, and left. The steam smote my nostrils, titillated tongue and palate—I had had no breakfast. I aroused to such a hunger as I had not known since that moment when the dirty Pedro set the chile con carne upon the bare table in the Independence eating-place; and when the Long American, peeping into the kettle, seized spoon and declared: "Meat in pot! Fall to! A man's courage requires a belly," I was nothing loth to follow his example and fish about in turn. And neither was Don Antonio.

The contents of the kettle proved to be meat boiled to white shreds; and unquestioned as to source it vanished into our mouths until the spoon soon scraped the bottom.

The Long American set the emptied kettle aside. He yawned, finished a half pipe.

"Might as well sleep," said he. "Mebbe I can dream out of this. Who knows? At any rate it'll freshen me up. I'd advise you to do likewise."

He arranged himself at ease, buried his leathery cheek in the crook of his arm, and invoked torpor. Murmuring apology to me, Don Antonio imitated him. But sleep I could not.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LONG AMERICAN ACHIEVES

Nor did I try. I was so saddled with rebellion against the machinations of fate that my heart ached sorely. I had won her—I had lost her—I had found her again—I was to give her up in the only way possible for me to give her up, and that to insure her bodily welfare; I was tied hand and foot when all that I asked was opportunity to fight at her bidding and in her honor; I asked but a rifle, and her, and a trail to be opened. That mine! Would to God the old señor had kept his secret! And as for her having fled me this early morning, I felt certain that it was merely a whim, a transient intimidation of the spirit by the flesh —a sudden revulsion and dismay at the severance from her father, and at the blind path which she had selected. She knew so little of me, nothing of my family, nor prospects, nor established character—she once had bestowed alms, out of pity; her heart, I comprehended, was tender; and by that trait she had been moved, in a reaction, to flee for the counsel of the old man, her father. She was shuttlecock to the battledore.

But I would have convinced him. She had intimated that she would not marry Don Antonio. If, then, the jail for me, the convent for her, nevertheless

I should live waiting and planning and serving. Life and the fighting chance, that I demanded. But with me dead—gone irrevocably; no, I would not require of her to waste her fruitful years in vain lamenting and sacrifice. If some Antonio might make her reasonably happy ——? No, I could not require of her to be immured in a convent, shadowed through the years by a veil and vowed to the abnegation of human love. There were others for the convent and that kind of a duty the rewards of which were not those substantial to youth and youth's proclivities.

All this engendered no melancholy, however. Dead, I resigned her; living, by heavens I did not resign her. I would resign nearly everything else—liberty, family, even country, if the trail to her pointed that way; but not her. And the old don was friendly. I had established my mettle, my being an American was incidental, for he could not deny that I was a man no matter what my nationality, and since his daughter loved me, he certainly wished her happiness assured inasmuch as his remaining days to guard her were short. Antonio I feared not in the least, whether he opposed me by wits or strength. Death alone could build a wall. And it was so incomprehensible to me that I, Richard Andrews, of Cincinnati and civilization, should be here, in this isolated spot, captive to savages the same as my father in years back had been a captive, and condemned to death, that I actually took heart.

The horrid culmination of the thing was not, I fiercely resolved, in my horoscope. I had not been born to this amazingly fantastic end. Possibly I was

being tried out, and in after day I would relate and laugh over my realization how nearly I had sat supine when already the tether was frayed and weak. It seemed to me—I had that turbulence and yeasty working which fomented in a subtle warmth that fed anticipation and even confidence. My father had escaped and lived, the Long American had escaped and lived, he did not fret, he slept as if with reliance upon the unseen marshaling of aid. I had more to live for even than he, and there were not Indians nor Antonios enough in New Mexico to deprive me of my rightful share of life's sweetness.

Why, in her herself there lay hope! The Long American was skeptical, he had doubts, he foresaw curtailments of her liberty of speech and action; but I saw her eyes, I heard her voice, to me nothing could gainsay her high fidelity and courage, and letting love aside, pity alone would drive her to move her father and heaven and earth in our behalf. Antonio! Thanks be, we did not depend upon Antonio! We had ourselves, and we had her.

Here I laughed gently, shook off the bogies, witnessed myself free and happy and married to my Rosa, with the Long American standing by, destined to dandle our children upon his knee and tell them "tall" stories of the prairies and the savage Indians, and of the time we all escaped their clutches. And I rather took pride in demonstrating for my satisfaction and the perusal by the crafty fates that I was no dead man yet.

This, of course, got me nowhere except in fancy.

The gap between fancy and fact was to be bridged by methods now in the making; methods to which I looked forward with pleasurable anticipation as to a crowning adventure.

With my uppermost worries evaporated and that peculiar lightness in the heart productive of daring, I shifted to the doorway and contemptuously throwing aside the flap looked out.

The sun beat down hotly upon this scene so primitive and apparently so innocent of passions that again I caught myself wondering, like the old woman in Mother Goose, if I was really I. The brown earth lay prone and bare, sprawled receptive and soaked through and through by the constant rays—abandoned, as it were, to the ecstasy from a god's caresses. And over all was the ineffable blue, bending stately to the horizons broken by those shimmering crags with which the basin was engirted, and by those azure tinted, whitely gleaming peaks of the mysterious distance. A few children played about, near the willows of the creek; two were tormenting a dog with blunted arrows and that, alone, was the visible rift in the crystal. Otherwise peace had enfolded the wretched village. The warriors had retired, probably sleeping as my two companions were sleeping; even the unharried dogs were napping; the several squaws busied themselves with domestic duties in and out of the huts; I might see the medicine-man's lodge, and the lodge of the chief, which longer held my eyes and to which my eyes insistently returned, seeking to burn through and to convey some sort of message reassuring to her.

Then, while I surveyed, in a measure wandering unrebuked much as though my astral body had left the corporeal and was unfettered, I became conscious of the effluvia from Indian refuse—of the yelps of the badgered dog—of angry scolding from a squaw—of a scrawny arm shaken at my peering face and of an outpost sentry squatted upon a rise whence, no doubt, he could watch the entrance to the basin. Likely the outposts extended farther; and albeit our especial hut did not seem under guard, nevertheless, I might well know, the carelessness was only a form. So I was forced to recognize the facts jarring with fancy; and I did not venture to sleep lest dreams should mock me; lest, in truth, chance should whip past me and on again. How could I sleep when the señorita might require me at any moment?

Her lodge stood as if untenanted. But after a little time a figure emerged; in the same instant I heard a yawn and a stir within our prison, betokening that the Long American was awake and getting up.

"What's doing?" he asked, at my back.

"Here comes somebody," I said. At first I had hoped that the figure was the señorita; a glimpse of her would have been extraordinary solace. But although it was a woman (in squaw dress, to be sure), as it approached I readily saw that it was only an Indian woman.

A young woman, this time; at least, younger than the hag who had fetched our food. The Long American stretched his neck over my shoulder to gaze.

"No Injun. She doesn't toe in. By thunder, I

dreampt good. I was out of this, free man, and so were you, and we had plunder. I felt hoss between my legs again, and smelled the Arkansaw. Here's first sign. Cross your fingers. Does she come from the chief's lodge?"

"Yes," said I. "Why? Is it a message?"

The young squaw neared; and whereas she was naturally dark and weathered darker, her eyes, as she flashed them upon us, were too lustrous to be the small cunning eyes of an Apache. The countenance was rather upon the negroid. What? Heavens above! Now I perceived. Her glances faltered, I thought that she flushed dully as by embarrassment, for, flouting her full eyes, her face was without nose save two clipped nostrils. Halting, she spoke in Spanish of perfect accent, clear from the mongrel inflections of the Indian.

"The chief wishes the Spaniard at his house," she said.

"Call him, you," bade the Long American of me. "I'll talk."

I brushed by him, to arouse Don Antonio.

"The chief has sent for you," I informed, shaking him by the shoulder.

He sat up, blinking.

"Dios! You say ——?"

"The chief has sent for you again."

"I will go." He scrambled to his feet, and stooping, made out.

The young squaw pointed.

"Now," she uttered. "He says to come."

"And you had best walk straight," the Long American warned. "Adiós, señor don." Then, with trace of sarcasm, "Remember us in your prayers, muy amigo."

Don Antonio murmured perhaps assent. His haste carried him on rapidly—he stepped in manner expectant.

"We'll not see him again," my friend commented. "And we don't need to."

"The kettle," prompted the young squaw, with eyes still averted.

"Fetch out the pot," he ordered of me. "Don't hurry."

I dawdled, trying meanwhile to interpret the low exchanges between him and our visitor. Finally I set the kettle within her reach. She picked it up.

"Adiós," said she, turning.

"Don't forget the water, señora," he spoke after.

He faced me, his eyes sparkling.

"By the powers, the trail's opening!" he exclaimed. "That's a Spanish girl—chief's wife, or one of 'em. Youngest wife, too. She has something to say; couldn't say it complete, now—didn't dare to. But I haven't dreampt in vain, compañero. We'll be quit of this yet. When she brings water we'll likely learn more. Antonio's out the way—that yellow dog! She'd not talk with him present."

"You mean she's to help us escape?" I stammered.

"I mean she's that on her mind which but waits proper occasion to slip hobbles."

"Did she say ——?"

"No, save by look. But Lord love you, I can read woman. Their sign is as plain to me as the speech of a fresh moccasin track. Married or no, I haven't lived sixty year among white, red and yellow wenches for naught. I've a way—oh, I've a way." And he sniggered sillily. "I can make eyes and sighs with the best, though you mayn't think it. Besides, here! Let's step back in, a moment."

He preceded me; I joined him and he passed me something soft, crumpled small from his large palm.

Soft and white it was, and filmy: a handkerchief daintily hemmed and fragrant still as I pressed it to my lips. Hers! Oh, my señorita!

"It bids you hope, eh?" he grinned. "Well, feed upon it. It came direct, 'For the young Americano,' she said, so I reckon it's not for me. But, faith, I once carried its mate—long time ago, long time ago. No matter. I had to use the same for tinder."

"The señorita sent this ——?" I piped, suffocated with foolish emotions. "A token—if a last token, she means—if a farewell—but you don't take it that way?"

"I take it as heart fodder," he stoutly asserted. "I take it as earnest of cheer up. She's enlisted the young squaw, you see."

I shuddered.

"The squaw! No Apache, no Indian, you say? Why is she so disfigured? Her face, that is. Her nose has been cut off?"

"There's a story. She's not the first I've seen marked that fashion. I fancy she was suspected of

trifling with some young buck. That's the penalty. However, all the better for us."

"The better for us?"

"Yep. You can depend on it she hates the chief now, if not before. She's a Spanish chattel, to boot. Oh, they don't keep their beauty long, none of 'em. The regular squaws see to that. Thank God, jealousy's as rampant in an Injun village as in a white city." And he added: "I'd best go outside. I don't like talking under cover. These Injuns may not sabe English but it's powerful queer how they put two and two together, same as a dog. They can sense mischief."

He left me to fondling of the handkerchief; to visions of my sweetheart's face—to recollections of that squaw's face—to knowledge that she, also, was a Spanish girl—had been beautiful! Jealousy, he had hinted. And fear possessed me. The señorita must be freed. That accomplished, I should march to the stake glad even in the conviction that she was for Antonio.

But the handkerchief was a vital element, breathing of her, somehow potent as a commission indicative that she was well, that she had plans, and that I should not despair. It set me apart from Don Antonio, elevated me above him, bid me disregard him; and I could smile to myself at his futile efforts to undo that which had been done. He might as hopefully shoot arrows at the stars.

Furthermore, the Long American encouraged—a scheme for us was developing in his vista. That trained intelligence of his, wonted to deal with odds,

was nosing, nosing, as tireless and acute as a ferret upon trail of a rabbit.

He spoke, through the doorway.

"Here she comes. Bueno. Keep within. One's enough, and least said just now, the better. You have your woman; leave me to mine."

I heard the Spanish squaw arrive with soft shuffle of unshod feet; I heard his short address, her musical syllables; I heard him gulp water, grunt and gulp again. He handed the clay vessel inside, with word:

"Drink, and spill what's left. I'll send for more. It means time and talk."

Thirsty I was, prodigiously thirsty; and tilting the jar I also gulped, my parched gullet making such an ado that I lost much of the conversation. The woman left with the empty vessel. My friend confronted me, in the hut, his shrewd countenance alight, his long throat tremulous with utterances.

"She'll come after dark, plans laid. We to get away—you, me, the señorita, and 'fore daybreak is the time."

"And Antonio?" I queried, my startled brain strangely enough venting that thought first.

"Quit him. 'Tis as I thought. He's sold us out. We were to stay until we paid in one way or another, and likely in the one and only way. That's no news, though. But the girl won't go."

"The señorita won't go?"

"No. Not without us—without you, at any rate, or unless we're included in the bargaining. She's a bit too smart. She's true blue. And the chief's smart,

himself. He's driving harder terms now, with the don, as more hocus-pocus. So we'll cut the knot by making off with the girl."

"This woman ——?" I queried. "Do you trust her? Why does she interfere?"

"Hum! Well—not just for love of me, I confess," he admitted. "She sees another wife, and a young and pretty wife. Again, she's Spanish—she's suffered—she knows the life. Atop of that, no squaw hankers to have a rival in the lodge. By thunder, a woman got us into this and a woman'll get us out. That's fair. Oh, didn't I say I could read the signs? Jealousy! Play jealousy and win the stakes."

"She'll be back this evening?"

"Yes; and talk. No more now. 'Tisn't safe. But she'll come, she'll come."

"We're to keep it secret from Don Antonio?" I blurted.

"Else we lose our hair and you lose your señorita as well. It's a three-ply pussy-in-a-corner: we, him, and the girl, and the chief in the center, holding us all fast. So we'll leave the don, if we have to tie and gag him. He and the chief can romp together. But chances are we won't see him again. The chief's back is up; Injun nature is riled, and the don'll have to make good his first word or promise more than is possible, a second time. He won't be trusted far, now. But in case he does happen in—well, I've said. There are no two ways about it, 'cording to the woman. She seems to hate his kind. There's another story on her back trail, and a caballero figures."

"She'll tell the señorita? We won't by any chance desert the señorita?" I admonished.

"We three: you, I, the señorita," he assured. "Nothing less, and no more. That is the hand dealt us and we must play it. Don Antonio will scratch for himself. Don't you doubt that."

CHAPTER XVII

WE MAKE PLANS

DOUBTING or not, I felt the proposition stick in my craw, as the saying is. To go thus—to leave him who, whether friend or enemy, was white and of gentle blood? To go and save the señorita, yes; but to leave him—to run away from him——! He was her cousin, and man of her race, and would she think well of me—would she even go herself if she understood? To be sure, in his plan she had been going out anyway, but with design of rescuing us who remained behind, for this I now appreciated. And what had changed the program as it had appeared to her? Did she suspect his zeal? Did she mistrust her own latitude when once she had been delivered to Santa Fé? Had word or look in the lodge warned her how the business was trending? Conceivably, any engagements that Antonio had made on our behalf failed to carry with her; lacked the essentials.

But the boot as transferred to us did not fit. With us on our way to the frontier, or forced into Santa Fé, what then could be done for Antonio in time to prevent the savages from wreaking reprisal upon him? What could be done for him at all? No, the boot fitted illy indeed. Our plan smacked of revenge, yet to me vengeance entered in not by slightest degree.

I would much rather have saved Don Antonio in a sally, if by so doing she also could be saved. Our plan was unfair to her, unfair to me. I dreaded the dénouement, albeit recognizing that desperate diseases exact desperate remedies.

Withal I was so bitten and tormented by hearty shame of the rôle, and the malodor of the path which had opened, that the glow of hope wavered wanly and I apprehended that after the deed was accomplished and she safe, I could not face her nor claim her respect. As for the Long American, he was inured to sudden advantages; he was squarely practical, and honest in his stand that better three lives than none; better freedom for her, at any sacrifice, than captivity dependent upon further bargaining. In fact, I knew that he himself would willingly stay, might that insure her well-being. Now, when only Don Antonio was to pay, why, how could we hesitate?

And she would not go without us, or good warrant of us. This cut off argument, like a mandate from the bench. If she despised me for leaving Don Antonio, so be it. Nevertheless the disposal of my character by destiny hurt; it contradicted American custom, it galled my very instincts as a human factor, it appeared something to which I could not adjust my name and family traditions. She scarcely would be more scornful of me than I was of myself.

The Long American chuckled on while my scruples wrestled with my concessions. Then when we were silent and he gazing for the squaw we heard a sudden commotion in the chief's lodge; the hide structure was

shaken, voices were raised angrily. Our woman with the water from the creek had paused, near the lodge, briefly to listen; now she hastened on to us, handed the jar to my friend, and with the low exclamation "The Spaniard is a fool. He has struck the chief. Wait," she hurried away. He turned furiously on me.

"That spells it! We make or break. They've had a fracas, he's dead man and if we don't get a guard placed over us we're lucky. Fool? Yes, and triple fool. He's condemned himself, he's sold her for a burst of temper, he's cooked the goose of the whole party. We take Dutch leave this night, or——!" He moderated. "Anyhow, we need have no compunctions. He's to pay, with us or without us. Our staying wouldn't soften his bed by thickness of one feather."

"They'll kill him?"

"Certain as the sun. No Injun'll take a blow with a bless you. Your Don Antonio's hair will be curing in the sun after the squaws and bucks get done with his body. As matter of fact, I doubt if our two hides are worth a picayune in the white market. And the girl's signed, sealed and delivered to the chief. Tonight's the night for skinning our rabbit, or never."

"We can't leave him," said I. "Not if we can take him." And I felt glad.

"Can't leave him?" The Long American gaped upon me as though doubting his ears. "We've got to leave him. I tell you he's dead man, or same as. Yes, dead or so near dead he lacks only a peeled crown."

"I'll not leave him if he's alive and there's any way

to take him," said I. "I shan't leave him to his death. Before, you thought he had a chance, an arrangement; and he might have betrayed us. Now he has no chance and he won't betray us. It's his life in the balance, too."

"And what good from him? Quo bono, if you remember your Latin? In plain United States, do you expect return in kind after you've put him in your debt? You're a heretic and a foreigner, still. And you're spoiling him of the girl. He'll thank you for his scalp, and then he'll see to it that you're clapped in irons and sent down to Chihuahua out of the course of his affairs."

"It will satisfy my conscience," said I. "I mind prison and easy conscience less than liberty as a coward. And it seems to me cowardly to out-face him by slipping off when his only chance now lies in us."

"You'll mind the fleas, and the thought that priest and family are working with him on the girl."

"I'll have her respect," said I. And I tried to smile. "Otherwise ——!"

"By thunder!" He started to expostulate again, but I detected in his surly tone a grudging approval which convinced me that his own best impulses were covered no deeper than mine. They were only a little better controlled. "If it can be done," he continued slowly. "That means a fourth to be provided for. The Spanish squaw may refuse; what then? She dislikes his breed. And perhaps we can't get at him. He'll be incomunicado. You'll not jeopardize us others merely for sake of waiting on his death song?"

"No," I answered. "I promise you that. If we cannot possibly get him away, and the choice focuses upon staying all of us, or taking the señorita to safety, of course I yield on her account."

"Lord grant that we can shunt him for Santa Fé and head to the Arkansaw ourselves," my partner grumbled. "Once Santa Fé closes on us, with him as sponsor, then we'll hear nothing but Spanish the rest of our lives, and pave the road to hell breaking rock. I pray no such fortune." He turned quickly, at a fresh squabble. "Anyhow, there he comes. I'd hoped we were rid of him."

For Don Antonio had been thrust bodily from the chief's lodge and between two Indians was being shouldered onward in our direction. An escorting train of idlers threatened with voices and missiles. We stepped inside. Presently he dived through to us, as if propelled at the last. He broke into hot Spanish as he sank disheveled, raging, and half breathless.

"No, no! Hold your tongue." The Long American left the don panting, and peered outside. "We're under guard," he announced to me. "A squaw. She'll not understand English, but she may Spanish. So nothing yet to the don." He seated himself. "Well," said he, to Antonio, "you've done it. You are a dead man. Were you crazy, thus to imperil us all?"

The don writhed, babbling incoherent.

"She would not go. She had turned stubborn as a mule. It was arranged; it——" He checked his fretful current. "The chief lied. That dog of an

infidel! He lied—he insulted me, a Spaniard of the pure blood whose fathers had flayed his fathers. Caramba! Do you think I would bandy words with him? He spat at me. And I drew knife."

"Get it into him, eh?" The Long American queried with keen interest.

"No! I would have killed him, but the devil is saving him for worse end. The fires are not yet hot enough. And now we are lost. Válgame Dios, we are lost! For myself, I would not care if I might only have reached his heart. I am a man. But the señorita!" And he tossed despairing hand. "The Holy Virgin help her! Still," he concluded, "there may be ransom."

"You disputed with the chief? Why so?" urged the Long American.

Antonio's face darkened, his eyes flashed again, and sitting straighter he gesticulated.

"The devil's own son, that chief! It had been arranged, I thought: the bargain. She was to go, else I was to go. She was to go," he hastily corrected. "That was the decision. She was to go, and I had pledged ransom. But you would not have been forgotten," he appealed earnestly. "I swear it. She first, though, of course. And whether she or I went out, I would have told your friends in Santa Fé, after our business had been completed. Then when the chief sent for me he said that she had refused. Dios! She had refused!"

"To go?" I asked. "Why?"

"To go and leave me, her segundo and lover.

Never was such a woman! I offered to go. Diablo! The dog of an infidel laughed. He demanded new terms, he increased the ransom, he questioned my word. I would have killed him, for I am quick, señores. Death for us two would have been welcomed. Now, what is, Señores Americanos? Santo Dios, what is? I have failed." And he groaned. "She is in the chief's hands—my Rosa! My life is forfeit. Your friends do not know." He swayed in anguish. "I have not even my knife."

"Enough said, señor don," quoth the Long American—his tone, I thought, a trifle softened; and indeed who could have witnessed the genuine distress of this miserable hothead and not lean somewhat from the pedestal of resentment? Not I, at all events, Spaniard and unfriendly though he might be. "What is done, is done, if badly done. The fat is in the fire and ablaze; and we are likely to be well burned getting it out if we can. Pray you to God, Mary and all the saints, for we will need them. Don Ricardo and I will make medicine after our own fashion. Man has got to help God, in this case."

"I will pray," he assented. "I am of the faith. They will give ear to the señorita, at least. But I will intercede for you, who are heretics."

Aside from his wretched murmurings we sat in silence, for the most part. His machinations, not entirely clear to me, had rebounded upon him. We could not trust him; that itself was clear. Out of his weak pride he had resorted to a lie; at any rate a perversion of the truth. His bald assertion that she would not

leave him, "her segundo and lover," fell blunted by our cuirass of better knowledge. And the chief did not trust him, seeing that his claim of influence with the señorita was proven shallow. If a braggart in that, then perhaps a braggart elsewise, the chief no doubt argued; possibly a braggart as to his influence in Santa Fé. And puzzled, and suspicious, and apprized by her action that we Americans were of value in the scales, the chief had put on the screws. There should be ransom for all or for none. But the blow had punctuated the discussion with a full stop.

The Long American nodded, dozed, snored at times. I admired his phlegm, which was an animal trait. As for me, I moved to where I could watch our small world with her lodge as the center, and that greater physical world encompassing. Out of all those leagues where safety and happiness bided, here we were, here we were.

The day waxed and waned. The village life proceeded as usual, I judged, its monotony lapsed again into routine. Our squaw guard squatted motionless and stolid and insensible; my eyes narrowed beyond her and at length were rewarded. From the chief's lodge a female figure issued, accompanied by the other Spanish captive, the noseless woman. She, the señorita, no longer wore the peón cotton which she had graced. Her garb now was Indian—a white skin shirt like a tunic, leggins and moccasins to match; all, I could perceive, embroidered, and all not poorly suited to her lissom mould. She bore them well and fearlessly under the espionage of the curious eyes around

and in the company of that hideous relic from her own sex and people.

However, the incongruity of the chaperonage assigned to her boded good rather than ill. The noseless woman was, to me, beautiful behind her mask. She was our angel of mercy, heaven sent; and I breathed thanks at seeing the two together.

The señorita did not so much as glance our way. They two proceeded to the willows and the creek; they returned—her face, beneath her hair somehow still piled in mass, was fully exposed to me; whether she succeeded in glimpsing me where I crouched, curbed close by the old squaw, in the shadow of the hut entrance, or whether I actually did make my eyes convey spoken message to her like a tap upon a taut wire, I cannot say; but I imagined that she saw, heard, sensed, knew; for with quick uplift of chin, and sudden glimmer of a smile to her companion she slipped with free movement into the lodge again. The world, seemed to me, had brightened.

CHAPTER XVIII

WE WAIT THE CUT-NOSE

NEAR sunset the supper preparations were apparent. Another kettle of stew was brought to us, and our guard was relieved by the bearer. She waddled away without a backward look. Then kettle and the woman who had fetched it departed together. This left us to ourselves, but none the more at liberty save to talk. And talk was restricted to haphazard remarks between the pipe-puffing Long American and me. Don Antonio sat as though immersed in a stupor of dread and helplessness.

When finally the sun sank behind the fringe of bluely shadowed crags on the west the village was infused with fervor of importance. Squaws hurried, warriors freshened their decorative attire of paint and plumage.

"Time's getting ripe," the Long American significantly uttered, to me. "But not a word, not a word, till we know." And grimly, in Spanish to Don Antonio: "Looks like a fandango is making ready. Cómo?"

Antonio blanched. He crossed himself.

"There is no hope," he muttered. Yet he answered with surprising constraint: "Quién sabe? As God wills, then, caballeros. We can die. If only the

señorita ——!" He shuddered. "But what else can we do?"

Dusk submerged the twilight. We were, of course, watched. Hue and cry were poised for any feeble essay on our part. Aye, what could we do, weaponless, horseless, with a girl dependent? I surmised that the Apaches enjoyed the tantalization. They were sure; and they were tentative, perhaps, to have us test them while they were testing us in turn.

It was deep dusk and a bustle of excitement, when quite unexpectedly to me, engrossed by trivial thoughts (as not uncommonly happens in such situations), we heard a low scratching upon the outside of our brush and skin hut. The Long American hissed us into immobility.

"Quién es?" he challenged, with voice cautious.

"Yo—I; the Spanish captive. I will talk. Be careful."

"Watch you at the door," he prompted, in undertone, of me. "And you, señor don, stay back, back. Hear nothing, say nothing. This is life or death."

He pressed an ear to the wall, which rustled as from somebody similarly pressing, without.

"Cómo—what?" he encouraged.

"I may speak?"

"Yes."

"It is for you two alone, señor. Not for the Spaniard."

"Bien?"

"I have come. The hour before the dawn is your time. To-night they dance. They will be tired. I

will bring you your guns, here. I will have the señorita where the horses wait, in the first curve of the little river. The hour before the dawn, when the morning star is risen over the mountains."

"You are sure?"

"God knows, señor. I will try. I have arranged. I have a lover, señor; even I. For I hate the chief. I swear by the Virgin, señor, that I was true to him. The other women lied about me. You have seen me —what happened. I do this for the señorita, lest the same happen to her. I was as beautiful as she, señor. I was a good girl. Now—Dios! I care nothing, and I am not ashamed." I heard her sob.

"How many horses?"

"Three; one for each."

I strained my ears. Would he stand by? He spoke firmly.

"There must be four horses, amiga. The young don of Santa Fé goes with us."

"No, no!"

"Yes."

"Not he, of his kind, señor," she pleaded. "I was a good girl until —— One like him deceived me, and laughed. I am Spanish, he is Spanish. Let him die." And I felt Antonio stir spasmodic. "He to the Indians. They cut off my nose because of what I seemed to be. They thought me not honest. Oh, Dios hear me, señor! You shall have three horses, not four. Leave that don. Do not trust him."

"You hear, Don Antonio? You will stay?"

"I ask no favor." His voice was steady, in the

dimness. "I made a bargain to save the señorita. You may make yours. Take her and go with God."

"We cannot leave him," resumed the Long American. "She would not leave him. He is her cousin. We are nothing to him, he is nothing to us; it all is for her. You do not wish to have her in the chief's house, among the women who will hate her?"

The Spanish squaw sighed, in tense moment.

"As you say, then, señor. Four horses."

"But we will take you, too."

"No. It is too late. I am not afraid. I can suffer no more than I have already suffered."

"Your name, that we may remember you in our prayers," he invited.

"I have no Christian name." And she choked up. "I—with this face—a squaw? The cut-nose, they call me. Con Dios." We knew that she stole away. The spot that she had occupied was on a sudden empty.

"God and the saints will reward you, Don Juan," Don Antonio vouchsafed. "My life was on your lips." He spoke as with genuine gratitude.

"Bien. You are yet likely to pay the fiddlers at this night's fandango, I warn you," the Long American returned. "If not, thank God for that. We are powerless there." To me he said, in English, apologetically: "We couldn't leave him. We would only have stretched our rope, instead of breaking it. And the squaw—at his word she would have been skinned piecemeal. Nope; he with us. That's in the dicker. And with your permission," he added, "I'll bear the

burden of his thanks. To put him knowingly in your debt also might rasp his Spanish pride."

"We'll get a message to the señorita?" I proposed.

"Cut-nose will tend to that, my lad."

Provision for the night's fiesta went forward apace. As darkness enfolded a spanking fire was built in an open space near the center of the camp, a stone's throw in front of our very shelter. The unwholesome community gathered around it, to the murmured comments of the Long American who read every token. Don Antonio sat dumb with his apprehensions, as well he might. I pitied him. He was now the arch offender, the self-selected first victim. And I had few thoughts to reveal, myself. For this night of nights loomed so fraught with stark realities, so strung with dreadful fancies accreted by the grisly scenes and sounds, so appalling with probabilities arrayed against the gossamer, wraith-like, almost derisive flickers of inadequate hope, that I required, I must confess, a stronger faith than mine to buckler off its threats. And the Long American's mumbled remarks were not inspiriting.

There was a slight movement of anticipation among the gathering. Then I saw the señorita led in and seated. The ruddy light flared upon her slim figure and her whiteness as she sank docile; it showed all faces turned her way, and the unwinking stare of hostile black eyes in flat, heavy, emotionless countenances.

Our own respite was scant; well-nigh at the same time we were summoned forth by imperative word; the Long American briskly stepped out—"Show no

fear," he said; I followed, nerved by his brave bearing and pledging him, I purposed, by my assumed readiness; the don, less capable, delayed for second call peremptory. He came, his mien resolute as he stood upright; he had mastered himself.

Conducted by a warrior we three crossed the redly glimmering interval to the silent circle and the celebrative fire.

We were seated somewhat apart from the señorita. My eyes sought hers at once with message of comfort, but she gazed before her and gave us no sign of cognizance. And immediately eyes and ears both were whelmed by a very maelstrom of salivated venom. From rabid lips that further contorted the sneering visages a torrent of insults drowning all other speech was outpoured upon us, until the flames seemed fed with eager hatred. In this orgy the squaws and children, I noted, were the most active, working themselves to a pitch denied the men. We sat as in a raging furnace, with the heat of those passions searing us in similitude beyond mere metaphor. I looked again to the señorita; she had not cringed, she sat as if immune.

The blast ceased abruptly. Into the confines of the circle there leaped a warrior, full painted, to jam a lance upright in the earth and to dance his deeds, real and imaginary. Stimulated by staccato thumpings upon a rawhide stretched over a large kettle, around and around the lance plumed with human hair he gyrated, chanting and hooting, bending half double, then erecting and bounding higher.

Warrior succeeded warrior, each as fiendish as the

other. I do not know how long this series of spectacles lasted. The pastime fascinated while it qualmed and chilled. It became, to me, like a torture so drawn out as to dull by its repetition. A prisoner at the stake perchance lapses into this semi-detached condition—a mercy accorded to harried beasts also.

The dancing of the warriors stopped short. Their perspiring bodies were rank to our nostrils; the odor of warm paint and tallow wafted smotheringly; in the truce we could catch the heave of coppery chests and the quickly vented breaths of the excited spectators. Then, to a shout, there sprang into the ring a figure more devilish, more affrightening than any yet. It was that of the medicine-man.

A flapping mask of cotton cloth paint-patterned to suggest a monster bird face fell from his buffalo crest; his body, naked to its pores, was profusely dabbled with black and white; charms in guise of claws and little sacks and bunches of weed and feathers girdled his bare waist; in one hand he shook his staff, in the other a rattle contrived from a dried bladder. Thus, arrayed, paunched, bandy-legged and spindle-armed, his skin folds pendulous to his motions, he pranced like a warlock ghoul—an apish familiar from the nether regions.

In evil he must have been one hundred; but his nimbleness was beyond credence. He ran here and there, he weaved like a snake, he hopped like a frog, he screeched, slaver presently driveled down his chin, those persons whom he approached shrank from him as from a witch finder.

The señorita had closed her eyes. He suddenly paused before her and pointing with his staff he yelped. He gamboled, with rattle of bladder, to us. He pointed at me—I braced to the ordeal and looked upon him. He pointed at the Long American, who said coolly in English: "You can scare children and Injuns, but not a white man." He pointed at the don. He spoke, a sentence, perhaps more; he charged through the circle and was gone; and in the relief I trembled as from the ague again.

Now amid an applauding cachinnation the squaws took the center; and they, too, cavorted, like unclean priestesses propitiating a Moloch with bloody promise, and with ever vindictive little sallies of brandished fists and sticks at us. They exhausted themselves. The chief, lifting arm, shouted a command. The tempestuous make-believe lulled; warriors and squaws trooped away; the señorita was reconducted; we three likewise were dispatched through the dwindling firelight back to our quarters. This auto-da-fé was over. Our bodies had been reserved to the crucible of another.

On legs that wavered under me I entered the hut, behind the Long American. The don came, to collapse and maunder weakly from the wracking strain. As for myself, the diabolical phantasmagoria kept reeling before my eyes, kept beating upon my ears and brain, so that my frazzled nerves quivered with the vibrant shrillness of a bee's wings. To cry, to laugh, to shriek, to run madly—in that there would have been easement.

"We've visited purgatory. Not my first trip, though," the Long American remarked. "There were minutes out yonder when I thought this was my last and we'd all be going on through, to next stage. But our hair's still in place, and by sun-up those yapping Belials will be dancing another tune, for which I'll gladly furnish powder and ball music."

He seemed to be prowling about. The flap of the doorway had been dropped upon our heels; after the dazzle of the fire and the daze of the swiftly moving performers the interior was pitchy dark. I heard him shortly ejaculate as if arrested by some object under foot or hand.

"Spy out if you can, and see whether we're guarded," he said.

So I crept to the door. The single flap apparently had been fastened against exit. But with exploring fingers I found a crevice in the brush wall, here, and a looseness of a skin thatch; and gently prying I achieved a peep-hole.

I saw the fading embers of the fire; the fire was all untenanted, the space intervening was vacant. Scarcely a sound broke the circumambient quiet. There were a few capricious murmurings of restless children, and reproofs from their elders; but we had been left enclosed with our own devices, while the village should sleep.

I withdrew.

"No one is about, I think," said I.

"Strike one of your jimcracks," he bade. "But easy with it. I want to see and it's quicker than steel

—specially," he added, " as you likely wouldn't lend me the tinder in your pocket."

I scratched a match, shielding it in the hollow of my hand. It gradually flamed; he was fumbling—I saw his puckered anxious face and the ghastly blinking countenance of Don Antonio who lay outstretched; in the wavering shadows that deepened the wall at the floor he pawed aside a strip of blanket; he extricated his treasure-trove: a rifle. Mine, I judged. Don Antonio half raised. I glimpsed a sudden relaxation of the Long American's earnest visage, turned almost roguish in his glee; then the match burned my finger and I pinched it out.

" That's enough," he uttered. " Muy bueno. She's served us—our friend. By thunder, now we're primed. Yours, mine; all the trappings. I want to whoop."

At the exuberant report so did I. Marooned sailor never heard signal gun or human hail with thrill more intense, more responsive. But like a sailor running to his lookout I had to know and to make certain. I crawled across, and blundering into him felt about greedily. The guns—there they were; and the powder horns and bullet pouches; my caps were still in my pocket. Hurrah! We had the sinews of war again; we were on our way to freedom if even by the exacting penalty of death, but a manly death. Why, what might not the Long American and I accomplish, rifles in hand? By comparison with our former plight this opening of the trail promised gloriously, gloriously; and the more so, in that the Spanish squaw was keep-

ing word. The tide of effervescent hope tingled in my throat.

"Thank God!" I managed. "We'll never give them up now."

"We can talk proper," said he. "I ask only the chief in front of my muzzle and her in the saddle under it."

Don Antonio spoke.

"My pistola? Is it there?"

"Sh! Are you a fool, to speak in Spanish?"

By this I knew that the pistol was not there. It may have been appropriated by covetous chief or warrior; but as likely the woman had hoarded that one sip of vengeance upon the race of gallants. The animal she would supply to him; but weapon—no!

The don lapsed, murmurous. The Long American said to me:

"There'll be four hours' wait. By the stars 'twas full midnight when that fandango seethed itself out. We've time enough for a snooze, if so minded. Lie down. I'll make medicine a bit."

"You've plans?" I inquired.

"None beyond putting distance between us and this as soon as we're in the saddle. We'll ride to the north and east and trust to strike the passes."

"To Santa Fé, if you deem best," I proffered. "Wherever will be safest for her."

He grumbled, whether in assent or dissent I knew not. Don Antonio ventured, at loss:

"What next, señor?"

"Wait."

That it was: wait. The don spoke not again. We had left him to his uncertainties, his misgivings fostered by our foreign tongue and our comradeship, and perhaps to his lurking disappointment over the pistol. I rather had compassion for his helplessness. But it was not this which held me wide awake; nor were the concatenated nightmares of the dance now flogging my senses with scorpion whips. I sat soothed by comforting inward warmth of spirit and by hand upon my rifle. No one not of experience in our stress can conceive how the feel of a weapon, at last need, may imbue with rugged buoyancy—may inspire with determination and feed the courage to the degree of almost foolish elation. Furthermore, a load of doubt had been cast off. The cut-nose woman was proving her ability. Providence in her had not failed us. I could have chanted an offertory.

The village slept beyond question. Unqualified silence had spread widely there without. In my troubled moments it was not the fierce pageantry at the fire which baited; that immediate past, as said, had spent itself: but the immediate future wavered with contingencies. I saw us fleeing, I saw us fighting, I saw her, or us, missing rendezvous—I threshed over and planned for possible, nay, probable mishaps, inasmuch as our chain of success lengthened with links very delicate in adjustment.

Well, away with doubts. We should act boldly. And I dispatched my thoughts to the chief's lodge; wondering if she, too, were awake and waiting covert

signal from the cut-nose sister. Did she, also, picture us—she and I—free and together? God grant that her hopes be not dashed.

CHAPTER XIX

WE PLY FOR SANCTUARY

THE minutes dragged in the wake of my musings. But as by the sweep of a hand they were suddenly wiped out. I must have dozed, sitting, for the Long American had gripped me by the arm and was hissing in my ear:

"Ketch up! Sling on your plunder."

"Is it time?" I stammered, as a makeshift while hardening my wits.

The darkness of the hut had paled. The chilly feel of morning was in the air. My heart beat crescendo.

"Yes; and high time. She's due."

The don had stirred; I barely saw him, sitting up.

"My pistola?" he prompted.

"Not here. No matter. You'll come."

"Dios!" he deplored. And recovering he muttered: "A stick, a stone, a knife—there will be something. I shall go."

The Long American was slinging horn and bullet pouch. I gladly donned my own. We took up our rifles; mine was loaded as at the time of surrender; so, as I judged by his satisfied grunt, was his. And ready we were.

Although the minutes dragged again, the murk of

the hut's interior thinned with portentous speed. Daybreak was marching on. The Long American fidgeted; the don stared wildly, his jet-black eyes searching for our faces as if he would read our inmost thoughts.

"She was to come and get us?" I solicited.

"Yes. So you understood?"

"I did," said I. "But ——"

Doubts, erstwhile buried, threw off their winding sheets and ghastly and ravenous attacked my thumping heart. Was there a hitch? Had the squaw failed us at the last? Were we stranded half-way? What had occurred, what should we do, how should we know? I heard the Long American:

"This is false dawn. We've an hour. But I'll wager the morning star is clear of the horizon. I can tell time."

"She was to come, you think?" I iterated.

"Yes, yes. But now's the minute. It's the very guts of opportunity. We'll not go off half cocked—and we daren't overwait, either."

"Sh!"

Don Antonio had warned. We listened; the strain was well-nigh unbearable. Then there sounded a merest rustle—a scratching at the threshold—a word:

"Ven—come."

The bubble of agonizing suspense burst; I again could have shouted; I soared, giddy with the reaction. The Long American was instantly at the door. He pushed aside the flap, unfastened; he seeped through, the don after, I crawling cautiously last. A dim figure was crouched outside; it was the cut-nose woman, and

I think that she delayed to refasten the flap, for we darted on without her.

The Long American led, bent at a trail; in single file we two others pursued, stepping fast and stepping in his tracks, as might be. Low in the east the morning star shone virginal above the ragged horizon, now pinkly tinged. Her quivering rays were diffused by a translucent mist not so much fog as a wizard spell confining a land to slumber. Amidst the glamor the Apache ranchería huddled ignobly as if abashed. To our progress by rapid circuit no dog gave tongue, no coyote barked from the hills. But false dawn? No! The real dawn was signaling its near advance, and I felt that we were late, late, late.

The señorita! Should we find her there, awaiting? Or was she yet to arrive while the pregnant moments swelled? Our outward swing to reach the river consumed time—the Long American led wisely, but every extra step tortured my soles as though they were bared to nettles underfoot. Ought we to go to the rendezvous first, or should we cut matters short by wresting her from the lodge? The Spanish squaw had not uttered a word, in my hearing; she had vouchsafed no sign; she had only disappeared.

We struck the river and skirting the willows we sped on down for the designated curve. Ponies snorted; birds were chirruping; every sound impressed me as an alarm and the scant crackle of twigs as we brushed the brittle growth carried like a tocsin. So much was at crisis; so much. With her, we would win; without her, we should lose.

The snorts of the Indian ponies were maddening. The brutes scented us. The Long American uttered petulant protest, and I knew how he raged internally. We might distinguish a nebulous group of the animals, standing as if herded together, across. It was the curve of the river, and our mounts. God be thanked. We plashed over. There were the four animals as promised—my mule among them; picketed securely, bare of backs—no saddles, which mattered little, for, that which mattered vastly, here was no señorita!

We had made rendezvous—we stood panting, peering and expectant, while the ponies, and our own animals, continued to snort. The eastern pink had broadened, all the sky had perceptibly paled and so had the earth, to effect that even the low shrubs were outlined against the soil and rocks. Mountain tips were sighting the sun. The star, flashing more brightly, seemed to warn us that there should be greater haste.

"The señorita!" Antonio gasped. "Where?"

"Not here," rapped the Long American. "Now what to do? Give her a little time ——?" He paused, harkening. The Apache camp lay lax, drenched with the high tide of sleep which culminates at daybreak. He spoke decisively.

"You with the horses, Antonio, and ready. We two will go in and get her. It is now or never. If we don't come back, make off while you can. If she comes, herself, don't wait for us; not a moment. Take her and ride belly to earth for the north and we'll cover your trail best we can."

"Sí," the don assented, with dignity. "I have no

weapon. It must be so. You are two brave men. God be with you, señores."

My partner glanced at me, with jerk of head as direction to accompany him. Forsooth I needed no special invitation. If she could not come to me I should go to her, with him or without him. How we might force the lodge itself if we succeeded in reaching it he had not said. That would develop. Boldness would succeed. Then, just as we stepped out, the village peace was shattered. First one dog, but quickly another and another raised wolfish voice; the clamor spread, while we stood too startled to speak, shocked by this counterstroke. Secrecy was no longer possible—we faced an awakening village and our plans had gone overboard as by a cataclysmic wave.

The Long American exclaimed.

"Hah! She's coming—by the Lord, she's coming! Ready with the animals, you. I'll meet her." He sprang forward.

And while Don Antonio busied feverishly, and I leaped to help him, I saw her—a white figure running very swiftly down to us, in the crepuscular sheen, from the huts, the black dogs snapping at her feet and short flapping skirt. It was like an angel escaping from the limbo of fiends.

The Long American, an uncouth Charon, tore at prodigious bounds through the stream; before him and behind her the village had upheaved and was irrupting men and women from its doorways. But she flew to him, he flew to her, the dogs turned tail and scampered cowardly. The boiling village gazed, guessed, per-

ceived, knew; yell was added to yell and a score of warriors launched themselves for us while the squaws screeched vengefully.

Our animals were untethered and jaw-looped, but so fractious that I dared not pass my thongs to Don Antonio and rush with my rifle to the support of the Long American. He had met her, he had seized her by an arm (from her other hand there dangled, I noted, a large pistol) and together they were posting on with such energy renewed that at times he whisked her clear of the ground. Warriors raced after, whooping.

They two forged through the creek; an eternity in moments, and they had arrived, but none too soon, none too soon. Arrows whirred and pattered—the don and I hauled the beasts short—I had mere glimpse of her blazing eyes and parted lips and loosened hair —a face deathly pale; her limbs were giving way, when he fairly threw her upon the nearest animal, with the words for us:

"Ride, by thunder! On with you!"

Mounting haphazard (I by chance upon my mule once more) we were instantly away, he jumping into the lead, she next, the don at her knee and I closing the rear.

We had her; the deed was materialized, although from what transient stuff? And by how close a margin? At any rate, we could fight.

As we scoured for the open country and the pass at the farther edge the arrows whisked by us, vainly summoning halt. With glance behind into the rising storm I saw that warriors had mounted and were full

tilt in pursuit of us, their weapons militant, their heels and voices urging their horses. All the basin was bright with crimson dawn; the encompassing crags sharply cut the horizon circle; but the little pass concealed ahead displayed no flag to guide us.

Not another word had been uttered. We rode in primitive fashion, with only the jaw loops and without even Indian pads. For a few minutes I had nervous fear lest the señorita could not keep her seat; with eyes fastened upon her I galloped tense to give her timely aid at the first sign of distress. She sat, however, tautly and firmly while her animal lunged stride after stride and Don Antonio's drew almost even. It was they two; he had my rightful place—and no. Mine was to guard from that peril of pursuit; to turn, if needs be, and stand it off whether I rode on again or not. So I followed, content with my office.

Moreover, the Indian horsemen were coming fast. Their foremost had already shortened the distance. I fancied that I could hear the thudding of their hoofs rivaling ours; their furious cavalcade extended like an uncoiling lash back to the river, and their van was forking like a snapper, to right and left. The yells were incessant. Yet hardly pressed as we seemed to be, and grim though our chances might appear, especially if we missed the little pass, nevertheless in this frantic race there was an exhilaration.

We pounded on, the Long American swerving not an inch from his chosen course. His eye and memory were accurate; as I prayerfully searched the unfolding vista of crags, the little pass, I believed, was opening.

God so grant. We might have to face about and hold it while the don sped the señorita through. The Long American's judgment should be paramount; I sunk all private ends, all personal welfare, to insure the one goal: her safety.

Our leader twisted neck again, for quick survey. He shouted, and pointed before; what with the hoof beats and the wheezing of our animals, and the whine of the air in my ears, I did not get a distinguishable word, whether of imprecation or encouragement. But the exit pass was opening, and as straight as the partridge flies we were pointing into it.

I thought that our pace actually increased. My mule was fear smitten; she closed in to the sweat-smeared haunch of the señorita's horse and would have skimmed by had I not tugged her down. The girl's hair, shaken free, whipped back upon the breeze and brushed the mule's outstretched nose. I was conscious of the aroma—an elusive essence intrinsic to her.

The Apaches had divided into two bands, one hot upon our trail direct, the other careening to the right but why, I did not then appreciate. Not out of arrow shot we thundered into the pass; with lunge after lunge of straining haunches we swept over the slight rise and amidst echoing crags thundered down for the other end and the larger basin. The Long American did not slacken; we were not to fight here; he had confidence, or else another vantage point in view.

We burst from the pass. The familiar basin received us. I was having harder work to restrict my mule; the brute pulled on the thong and shook her

head. She could do still better; or—and at that the matter resolved catastrophic. The señorita's mount was failing of stamina. By the ruthlessness of chance my sweetheart had been assigned the poorest animal of the four; Don Antonio's itself was superior, for now I observed him riding with tight line also.

The enemy had gushed out of the pass; the large basin rang to their cries as again they chased by sight. We had obliqued to the right—to the east; that goal of the rocky pass remarked by the Long American when he had killed the deer was the nearer; he had figured upon it and had well figured. Not all of us could win the gateway by which we had entered.

Indeed the hue and cry was resounding terribly close. We might yet have to turn at bay. I looked to my rifle; the cap was in place, the hammer only needed to be cocked, the barrel leveled —— Now the pursuit cries redoubled, in a savage pæan of new rejoiceful tenor. The second band of red Tartars came swooping down the slopes fore-quartering on our right. There was another pass in; their reappearance told the story, and on short line they bid high to head us as we rode, or—yes, to race us on deadly terms for the very gate.

With a bound I ranged my mule alongside the señorita's mount; leaning I smacked its flanks with all my force. Antonio smacked. She sat well, my Spanish sweetheart, clutching bravely with her limbs, lifting her animal with hand and vibrant voice. The fault was in the brute; we and she could get no more out of it.

With a shout the Long American veered again; like

hunted rabbits we changed course acutely, into the west. It was to be the vantage of the old camp, at the cursed mine! The Apaches on the east shrieked gleefully; I glanced to rear—the pack there had deployed into semicircle, one end of the arc extended now to pelt almost parallel with us on our left. We could see the paint, we could see the lance plumes, and the arrows upon bow and the tossing scalp feathers, and the mockish grinning faces.

My mule was even with the señorita's horse, inciting it while I incited. Her countenance agonized upon me, and I assuaged with a smile. Arrows sung waspish. The don belabored. Thus we plied for life or death, following the Long American, and the disturbed sun took station to watch the rout.

Death gained. The Apache chief himself bore the banner; outstripping his command he was swinging for our front—was edging in, two or three of his warriors not far behind him, to drive us aside toward the other pack. The trap was closing.

With another shout the Long American reined and wheeled about, so that we passed in a rush of hoofs. His rifle had leaped to his shoulder; in the second of pause it cracked, but before I might mark the shot I was all occupied with a casualty apart. My sweetheart's horse cried out with dismal groan—sobbed—faltered —blood blew from its nostrils—it plunged nose first; and whether I was quicker of eye and muscle than Don Antonio, or whether she toppled toward me instead of him, at any rate I was the one who seized her, lifted her, dragged her bodily from off the collapsing brute

and somehow holding her bore her clear. She yielded and clung; the weight of her was nothing in my encircling arm; her hair was everything to my cheek and lips; under double burden and rein relaxed my mule rocked on.

A very tempest of ululating screeches raged behind. I looked. The chief was unhorsed and prone, face to the sand—the Apache charge there was converging upon him in loud dismay—the Long American was galloping after us, his rifle reloaded and threatening elsewhere. And by that directed I witnessed a stirring action.

Don Antonio had bolted at a tangent into the north. It may be that his horse had stampeded, it may be that he had mistaken our projected course, it may be that —but he was engaged in a gallant even though an involuntary try. He backed, I saw, the best animal of our four; he probably could have distanced us, any time. Now he rode vaquero like, or Indian like, rather, bent forward to lie low upon his horse's neck so that the two, man and mount, were one. Down right abreast of the Indian ranks he rode.

The warriors nearer to us, in that direction, had scattered from the muzzle of the Long American's rifle; the bows of the others there were working, their arrows twinkled in the sun, shuttling with glints of light and weaving a net of darting strands about the harried centaur. The horsemen paced him, drew in on him, couched lances at him; from the back of my splendidly striving mule, with her in my arms, I gazed absorbed, forgetful of our own peril. Then, at the last pinch, as

seemed to me, straight through bows and lances and jostling barrier he drove; he vanished, swallowed by the brush of the cliff wall. As true as the needle to the magnet he had entered the gate.

His pursuit halted; turned and came on for us. But my mule was lurching up the rise to the old camp; the Long American whooped exultantly. He overhauled me, we stopped, we about-faced, we tumbled off, the señorita sank weakly, he and I challenged the trail with rifles avid. The Apaches were convening at safe outskirts, and we had breathing space.

CHAPTER XX

WE RAISE THE DEAD

THE grace was sorely needed. Our two animals stood sweat-lathered and atremble, heads drooping, lungs heaving. The closed eyes, loose lips and lax form of the señorita at my knees spelled her exhaustion of nerve and flesh. The Long American, panting himself, looked upon me with a grin belied by the battle zest in his words.

"Well," said he, "a narrow squeak. Here we are. We gained sanctuary. That's all. Now we'll have to work fast."

"Yes," I gasped.

"The mine. It'll cover us. It's the only place. We daren't risk a surround here—not with her on our hands. Tend to her while they palaver. I'll fill a canteen with water. I've sack o' meat given by the cut-nose. There may be help from Santa Fé, if the don gets through. The skunk! He left us hostage, though. And with the mine at our backs—mebbe we can find exit farther inside. But out here—nope! We wouldn't last the day. They're too desperate."

He snatched up a canteen from our former camp and fearlessly strode down for water. The Indians before and below were in council—brief, I apprehended, at the best. The medicine-man was already

haranguing them; for there he was, agile, new inspired, and malice full. Occasionally all faces were turned our way and a gust of menace outlicked for us like a tongue of fire.

I stooped over my sweetheart. At touch of my hand upon her shoulder her eyes opened. The blood flushed her face. She laid fingers upon my arm, half wonderingly. She still grasped the pistol—Don Antonio's.

"Ricardo mío," she breathed. "Are we safe?"

"We are safer, querida. We have sanctuary. See?"

She gazed about; she shuddered at the savages.

"Don Antonio! He is taken—he is dead?"

"No, no," said I. "He escaped by the little door. He is on his way to Santa Fé and will bring help."

"You know? In truth?"

"I saw him go."

"Santo Dios!" she murmured. "But if he is taken, or killed! He is alone; I have his pistol; and we ——! You will never surrender me to them, now?"

"Never, dearest," said I. "Never to the chief. He is dead by Don Juan's bullet. And never to any other."

"But they will attack," she cried. "If we have no help—you two are brave, I know, but they are many and so cruel. If no help comes ——? I have your promise?"

"I bore you here on my own breast, sweetheart," said I. "You remember? That had to be."

"Yes," she uttered, "I remember. I thank you.

It was a miracle. How strong and quick you are, Ricardo!"

"It was for this that Don Juan and I, and Don Antonio with us, yielded to those demons," said I. "We laid our bodies at their feet and we have risen again, bringing you. Oh, Rosa mía!" I reproached, for I could not withhold. "Why did you try to leave me? Don't you know that I would never leave you?"

She swayed.

"My father!" she broke, in sudden agony. "I wish to see him. Now if I never come, if Don Antonio never comes, he will be bereft. He has no one else."

"You will see him," I comforted. "And Don Antonio (and this I proffered out of full heart that pained with a vague bitterness not, thank Heaven, so much jealousy as a certain disappointment) will get through. You brought out his pistol. Good! We ourselves must trust in God and our rifles. God sent that cut-nose woman as an angel, and He will find us a way again."

"She was indeed an angel; she should be enrolled among the saints. We shall never omit her from our prayers, Ricardo. But I was almost too late. Dios! Somebody waked. I just managed. She gave me the pistol. She opened the flaps. I ran. The dogs barked. I ran on. Then ——"

The Long American, returned with dripping canteen in fist, stayed further exchanges. And so did a briskly warning chorus from the Indians.

"The girl into the hole," he ordered. "Take her. I'll be swabbing the critters' mouths out, else they

won't stand. A full drink now would founder 'em. We'll tie 'em short as we can, out of plain sight. Then you and I'll fight a bit from best vantage till we get driven in, ourselves. Hurry up."

I lifted the señorita; she tottered upon her feet.

"Where?" she asked.

"Into the mine, dear heart. We opened it the morning you ran away." That morning seemed far in the past, like another era. "Come."

I led her to the slight hollow. She shrank timorously from the black and silent mouth.

"No, no! It is a grave, it is death. I will stay outside with you, Ricardo. I have the pistol, I will fight —I am a Spanish girl and you shall see."

"You are a Spanish girl and a brave girl," said I. "You have the pistol—yes. How many loads?"

"The one," she faltered.

"Keep it for yourself, dearest," I reminded. "But nothing will harm you here. We have been in. Outside, bullets and arrows will be flying; and (this I forced my lips to utter) you wish to see your father again. We will join you soon."

"I wish to see my father," she answered simply. "That is true. Also about the pistol. And I am tired. But you will come, Ricardo—you and Don Juan? You won't delay long."

I handed her into the tunnel. Without ceremony I left her, a white figure framed by the blackness and gazing after me, and hastened to the Long American. He had worked rapidly. He was giving a sip of water in his hat to my mule; his own animal had been simi-

larly treated. I grabbed thong and we picketed the two mounts short in a clump of cedars and rocks.

The Apaches' plans evidently had matured; amid a great yelling the council group scattered. The Long American and I took stations. There was no parley. By the energy I conjectured that Antonio had escaped and that the Indians would forestall succor for us from Santa Fé.

The council warriors united with the riders who had been careering back and forth in fine display of horsemanship and rage; the line swiftly extended to flank us; it closed in—the enemy, some of them mounted but the majority afoot, ever swerving nearer or stealing on by taking advantage of each dip and rock and patch of brush. It was amazing how they scudded and squirmed and scampered.

There were few guns, and these clumsily exploited. The arrows outranged them, outdid them in precision, so that, with us twain glancing right, left and before, and provoked by an infinite variety of marks elusive but tempting, 'twas not more than ten minutes ere our little fortress of the only partially sheltered flat was alive with streaking shafts. They whizzed like vicious hornets; they glanced, droning; they plunked solidly and shivered to the very notches. The bullets I did not mind; but those arrows had cunning—they were so busy to seek us out.

We fired, and fired again, to check the tide. I know that I killed one fellow creeping like a snake, for there he still lay after a single convulsive throe. I held sight upon a head poked between two rocks—the head van-

ished at the report and did not reappear. I heard the Long American's hearty rifle. Our defense became a routine—the careful selection, the sudden aim, the touch upon trigger, and the report; then the quick reloading, eyes questing meanwhile, and the selection again.

"Fetch that medicine-man if you can," the Long American besought, from my rear where he tried to cover his half circle. "I don't touch his infernal hide. I need silver bullet. But with him down we save our scalps."

The medicine-man had no notion of being singed. Keeping at long range he scuttled back and forth in the clear behind the crawling, running, racing warriors, and with a chant like an incantation egged them on. Twice I drew hopeful bead on him, with faith in my Hawken and a prayer on my lips; but either I misjudged the elevation or my eyes failed me, for he continued to prance unceasing.

The sun upon the rocks and dried sod grilled us; and strange to say, the flies bothered: sticky, fat blue flies engendered, no doubt, by the deer carcass and the dung. Yet had we been three—had the don stayed, with the pistola, even, so that we might have posted ourselves one to cover the spring slope, one to cover the remaining slope, and one to menace any attempted seizure of the little rise over the mine, we might have held out for some time. But lacking the don (and his defection irritated me not a little) we were pocketed; more significant, the Apaches were reckless beyond the wont of Indians when attacking white men at bay.

Just how reckless they were, and how determined, we were yet to learn.

Pretty soon an arrow from a new direction whistled past my very ear; there hustled another, accompanied by a burst of nearer yells. The Long American barked brusque command.

"Get! They're atop us. Run for it."

He sprang up, fired at the rise, swept it momentarily clean, and we ran, gaining the mine mouth where stood the señorita, her eyes wide and form rigid.

"Inside, all!" he bade. "Out of sight."

Shoving her before us we entered; here in the extremity of semi-darkness we faced about and listened.

Our dash for reprieve had been observed and gleefully heralded. Voices called, urging pro and con, and exciting another strident clamor. Then silence fell—a feature more nerve sapping than menace undisguised. A wonderment and crafty reconsideration seemed to be at work, without, as when a cat, claws unsheathed and grappling, steals upon a shallowly holed mouse.

By cautious approach the enemy, we might know, were reconnoitering nearer. I caught elusive sounds —shufflings, roll of pebbles, little crack of twigs, scrape of crawling bodies; at the edge of camp, I imagined, and even overhead. We were being invested. The breath of my sweetheart fanned my cheek with quick, short measure. I fumbled behind me and grasped her hand. The Long American prompted:

"Further in, for us; clean out of sight and out of shot, too. I can't say—if 'twasn't for that medicine-man they wouldn't venture—but with him goading

'em —— We'd better play sure. Get back, get back!"

He turned. He strode into the darkness. The señorita and I made slower progress, for she needs must be guided wholly by me and I could see scarcely an inch. By feeling we rounded the shoulder; and by feeling we stepped aside into the chamber there, and none too soon. For again the savage wolf-pack belled us, their din of high discord echoing demoniac through our vault; arrows thudded and clattered, filling the outer chamber with rebounding, glancing missiles.

Silence ensued. I could picture the Apaches peering, listening, at loss. Our own silence baffled them. The Long American chuckled.

"They can do that all day, and no harm. You stay here. I'm going back. Pass me your lucifers."

I groped for him with the case. He seemed to be receding. I saw the meagre glow of a match. The murk doused it, and he returned.

"Way's closed," he said, decisive. "I run against a cave-in, or else end of tunnel. We're properly holed. Now what?"

"María madre!" my sweetheart appealed. She shivered. "If help doesn't come ——!"

"You count on Antonio; or no?"

"He will do his best. He is Spanish, he is brave and my cousin."

"Humph!" My partner grunted grudgingly. "Likely so. I give him the benefit. He'll have a tall story that'll set all Santa Fé by the ears. Well, never you fear. Present company is more to be depended

upon. We're two men; we're armed and watered and provisioned; we've ghosts fighting for us, and what's better, we've good American guts."

"And you to protect," I added.

Her hand tightened in mine. Our voices, even at their low pitch, sounded unearthly in this black void. In the outer world the Indians were discussing. Snatches of council reached us. The medicine-man began to address. I sensed the Long American harkening attentively. He murmured, pondering:

"By thunder! They mean to rush us, ghosts or no ghosts. Know they got to do something. We've to reckon with that medicine-man; and there's a dead chief and several dead bucks. And when it comes to a fracas in the dark, bullet against arrow and lance, knife against knife and two against a mob that's blood crazed and thinking itself spirit proof ——! I didn't look for that. No, I didn't. Humph!" On a sudden he cackled with an idea. "Whoopee! Lacking silver bullet for him, we've other business stronger than his. That carcass! They'll never stand that carcass and we won't need fire a charge."

"The carcass?" I bleated.

"Why, yes! That carcass, the candle, that she-rag you wear next your heart—we're outfitted complete. 'Tis an old trick; I've heard of the same before. Wait."

He moved away. We heard him pothering; now I recalled the mummy sentinel, and I recognized the scurfing of parchment skin and flesh in his hands, distinguished the clink of the chains; there was a slight

tearing, wrenching response; and still cackling under breath he came back into the angle of the shoulder.

"A match. Here's your box. I want a light," said he. "Shield it behind my hat lest they mark the glim. And out with your keepsake of a 'kerchief."

I scratched match in shelter of his broad-brimmed hat. The phosphorus boiled and flared; revealed him holding the mummy in his two arms. Stiff and grinning and swart, an outline of bone and sinew, it sprang from the shadows like death fastened to him vampirish. The señorita vented gasp wordless. Her features were frozen into the full semblance of stark, paralyzing astoundment. And this spectacle, of him, leathery, roguish, turkey-necked, cuddling the stygian incubus (which, I observed, had lost its feet in the rape) to his rangy person, here in the very tomb, almost made my hair rise.

The hat cast the match glow behind us so that the passage around the shoulder was still plunged in obscurity. He reached and grabbed the handkerchief; and while I lighted him he adroitly tucked it to veil the mischievous skeletonized visage.

"The candle," he ordered. "Here 'tis."

I started the candle; he retired farther—"Hold you the hat over," cautioned he; and then he thrust the candle inside the skull. It shone spectral through the handkerchief; and a more affrightening fantasy I had never dreamed in wildest delirium. Yet, too, it was laughable. My sweetheart exclaimed once, smotheredly: "Holy Mother!" and subsided.

He abruptly puffed out the candle; his gleesome

countenance and the grisly visage vanished together as the darkness swooped upon us. So we waited, pent and expectant, daring only to breathe.

A hush, brimming with the unknown, and as oppressive as a sultry night when nature lies gasping and thunder mutters below the horizons stifled all token of energies without. The Apaches were mystified. We might be far in, we might be ambushed closer; we might be already smitten dead by the guardian spirits. I was certain that the various aspects of the matter vexed them. However, time was not their ally; and while they hesitated we might be escaping, or relief be nearing.

Now the voice of the medicine-man lifted in chant hortatory until one could well-nigh see his contortions and vile fury. Then I heard a sly rustling—the rustling of snakes, the rustling of rats—and the sibilance of nervous breaths; even the errant scrape of bow or arrow or knife or lance, in contact with earth and rock. The ultimate for us had keened: we might defend the passage, yes, with muzzles belching and butts clubbed; might defend it hand to hand, for the end that underfoot, under arms, between and over they should break fanatic way and with aid, perhaps, of torch or fireball, turn the chamber into a shambles.

They were coming. I hoped that none of them had perceived the fitful glow, or at least suspected the source; and evidently none had, or if—but they were coming, while their priest caterwauled his exorcisms. The señorita had pressed to me. The Long American touched me with significant grip; I applied match again

to his candle set inside the skull. He advanced boldly and silently, holding the thing, hat shielded, stiff as a papier-mâché mannikin, before him. The candle smoke floated behind and swirled to the roof; the flare made him almost as horrible as the mummy itself.

My sweetheart sidled within my arm. The rustling and the sibilance and the scraping were nearer; the enemy were right at the passage. We saw the image bearer whip off the hat and stretch around and expose the thing beyond the shoulder. The passage danced in the smoky flicker and every little projection of roof and walls took on impish life. Just for an instant while the demon barred with flame and fume and eye-socket of lipless white face all sound ceased. Then, crashing, rolling, deafening, there bawled such a united cry of absolute terror that we fairly reeled between shaken roof and floor. Thud of moccasined feet followed, as rapid as drum taps; thud of feet, and collision of body with body, and rattle of weapons abandoned in dire haste; all mingling with a jangle of animal utterances not to be described.

The Long American dropped the thing and sprang shouting; I charged madly after, stumbling upon it, but undeterred. The impulse was irresistible. Rifles cocked and greedy, we popped right into the sunshine. And at that we were barely in time. The entrance threshold was clear—the alarm had spread and quickly ramping out of the hollow for wider view we witnessed every savage in sight radiating, afoot or ahorse, in panic for the plain below.

My partner threw rifle to shoulder, for speeding

shot. The splay-foot figure of the now grotesque medicine-man miraculously limned before my weaving muzzle; I steadied, touched vengeful trigger, he leaped higher and fell sprawling ere ever spat of ball drifted up to me. Two running Indians seized him and dragged him on with them. The Long American whooped; I whooped; the enemy rioted on if anything faster. Reloading, we looked upon each other with eyes still dazzled, and I found myself laughing hysterically.

The counter rout was thorough. In a minute more the Apaches were tearing across the basin for the southern boundary.

CHAPTER XXI

WE GRAPPLE FORTUNE

"SKINNED 'em alive—sold 'em, lock, stock and barrel! They'll swear they saw the Old Harry." My comrade bent and writhed in ecstasy of mirth.

"They'll not come back?"

"They?" He bubbled again.

"We've time to get out, anyway," said I. "We must get out."

He straightened, sober at once; and something he replied, but I was running for the tunnel and paid little heed. The señorita met me at the portal.

"They are gone?"

"Gone," I reassured. "And we must go too. Come."

"To Santa Fé?"

"I do not know—I do not know," I answered; and hand in hand we made speed. "Perhaps to Santa Fé, perhaps to the Arkansaw and the traveled trail. Wherever will be safest for all. We'll take no chances now."

I felt her lag a trifle; but she recovered and ran lightly, so that in brief space we were at the old camp. The Long American was sitting there, near the animals, and anon still chuckling. She sank to rest, while I went on to him.

"Even left our critters," he hailed.

"That's good," I panted. "The señorita may have my mule. I'll walk, and gladly."

He gazed at me with studied blankness.

"Where? Why so?"

"Why," I cried, "we must get out. We can eat on the way. The Indians may not return, you say; but they may—they may think better of themselves—they're likely to return and spy upon us, at all events. I don't believe they'll give up so easy. We must go."

"They return?" he laughed. "Never! That's not Injun nature. I'll wager the squaws are already packing up and breaking camp helter skelter; and by evening the whole outfit'll be thirty miles distant and wishing they were farther. No, no; that prank of ours is stronger medicine than a regiment of soldiers. They won't come back; they wouldn't come back even to snake off their dead, if they left any—and I reckon they did. Scalps'll be missing, they'll find, should ever they prowl through; for this evening I mean to take hair, if hair there is. I've flayed a cold head before this. Just at present, though, we've more warming business." He narrowed his eyes upon me. "What's to hinder our staying right here for a little spell," he demanded, "and playing our luck?"

"You don't propose to stay *now!*" I accused. "Now, when we've won free?"

"I do." And his jaw set. "Won free? Yes, and with what? Our own hair and hide, no more than we brought in. You've got the girl, but what have I? I'm old and poor, and I've my fist in the pouch of fortune at last. To what extent, you ask? To withdraw,

hunch my back at her and slap her across the eyes with my tail? No! I'm of same mind as yesterday—wasn't it? 'Twas for this I traveled clear from the Missouri; 'twas for this I did my possible with white, yellow and red, to present moment; and while like any other true man I'd have risked all for sake of woman, and did risk, now like any sensible man I mean to stay on long enough to take my earnings." He doggedly jerked his head aside. "Go you, if you like, with the girl; go to Santa Fé and lose. Or stay till we clean out yon hole, make up packs that will serve to grease our way through the world, and strike for next sanctuary at the Arkansaw. I stay anyway. That's said. And it's the safer job."

"But Don Antonio'll be upon you—us—with the Spanish."

"Not so soon, not so soon. Those Spanish require preparation to go against the Injun; as witness that they have not come yet, from first alarm. What effect Don Antonio's tall yarn now will have, quién sabe? One girl, two Americanos—caramba! He's saved his pelt; 'twill lesson him proper if to no purpose and he bleats in vain. At any rate, compañero,"—and his tone softened,—"what we've got is ours to hold, and we've more rights in the mine than in the girl, remember. If we both ride out with her for the ciudad, she's lost to you and we all to each other; if we both ride for the Arkansaw, well and good, but we'd be simple fools not to ride with double stake. So here I stay. We were given chance, we took chance, we were bamboozled, we accepted battle, we challenged loss com-

plete, we hazarded throw of dice, we overturned every circumstance and where did we arrive at the end? Why, back here! I felt we would, when I câched the papers. I stay, else I'd regret to the day of bald head. What is it for you? The same: doubles or quits? Aye? No? I grant you free hand, without blame."

I knew that he was obdurate. He put me into a dilemma—not so much balanced between greed and fear as between fact and expediency. A bias for the treasure I had, to be sure—gold is no less welcome when a man is young and striving than when he is old and inert. But although my zest was divided, it focussed upon single aim: her security regnant over our mutual prosperity. And the gold appeared immaterial beside the material her and her dependence upon our unprejudiced judgment.

Notwithstanding, I would be unable to sway him. He had all to gain, he already was entitled to more repayment than I could bestow upon him by mere thanks. Indeed, I was greatly his debtor; I had cut little figure of heroics in these recent events. That I realized keenly. He had commanded, I had only obeyed; and as commander he had also taken upon himself the brunt of affairs, by action as by word. He had proposed fighting, he had proposed surrendering, he had worked upon the cut-nose; and with equal boldness he had met the señorita, he had shot down the chief while I had galloped on, and he had dressed the mummy and borne it to the fore.

"Let me speak with her a moment," said I. "Her

choice shall be mine. If she wishes to go, I shall go. If she will stay—how long?"

"Till to-morrow in the morning. We're not outfitted to dig. We can only explore, within that time; yes, and maybe get inkling whether we should come back in force."

"Then if she will stay, I shall stay gladly, Jack," I promised.

"It's bad business being tied to a petticoat," he deplored. "One gives hostage to fortune by it. Who said that? Bacon! Gad! So much for a college education. But hurry. We must eat, then act."

Disappointed, and moreover little pleased with the prospect I hastened to the señorita. She read my perturbation in my face, for she greeted anxiously:

"Is anything wrong?"

"No, beyond that he is determined to stay here until to-morrow."

"Not here! He dares to?"

"The Indians won't be back, he says; and I think so, myself. That trick frightened them out of the country."

"But Don Antonio will bring soldiers or others from Santa Fé."

"We don't know. It will require time. The mine is Don Juan's; I resign my share to him—I have you. He is willing to risk making off with at least a stake."

"And you?" she queried, eyeing me.

"I had thought to leave at once. The mine is nothing, now, to me. Shall we go?"

"Did you find any gold?"

"Yes, a sack of it, in ore. He is certain there are more sacks."

"Where would we go, you and I?"

"I see no place other than Santa Fé; I do not know the trail from here to the Arkansaw, except through Santa Fé."

"Where would he go? To the Arkansaw?"

"So he says."

She nodded gravely.

"That is the safer. I would have neither of you in Santa Fé again. Will you stay, Ricardo?"

"Only with you; and with you I would start at once, if you but favor it. He gives me quittance in the matter. I'll take you to your father. I'm not afraid."

She surveyed; laughed a little weakly.

"I am so tired, Ricardo. Let us stay. I am not afraid, either ——" and she added, under tremulous breath, "except for you."

"To-day and to-night here, then," I yielded. "You will rest, we will work. To-morrow, out, he with his treasure, I with mine, for other sanctuary."

"With treasure, God grant," she uttered. "That is why you both journeyed from Missouri. I know. And I know, too," she smiled, interrupting my next protestation, "that I am famished, and very sleepy."

At that I posted over to the Long American. He questioned:

"Qué cosa? Which? Do you go or stay?"

"We stay," said I. "Till to-morrow, as you plan. She wishes it."

"A proper squaw," he remarked.

"Sir!" I chided.

"I refer only to her garb," he grinned.

"And she will eat and rest—perhaps sleep," said I.

"Human, then, eh?" he drily commented, rising. "Requires something more substantial than ambrosial dew and likely wouldn't object to a measure of mintable assets in exchange for that coin she passed you in day lang syne."

The conclusion was not to my taste, but I let it by. She was capable of compassion transcending pity, I trusted; but I could not associate her with avarice.

From the sack of dried meat supplied by the cut-nose, and with draughts of water we dined royally and in a degree merrily: the Long American's conversation reiterant of ghosts and treasure trove; my own framed upon the pictures that he drew, while my deeper thoughts unspoken ranged like a hawk, seeing far beyond the horizon; and she smiling upon us both, with now and again contemplative glance, quickly averted, at me—betrayal of anxieties only feminine and natural. She had been through much since she had left her father's house.

After we had eaten she composed herself to sleep, this time, at our suggestion, before the mouth of the mine, so as to be nearer us while we worked. He and I watered the horse and mule, and picketed them more free to graze. Not a hostile sign for eye or ear was evidenced anywhere about; but down in the basin there wandered a horse, riderless, one of the Indian mounts.

"There's a fellow we're like to need," quoth the

Long American, squinting. "For the girl or pack. With her astride horse or mule, you and I can hoof and make no complaint if our critters have enough else to carry of the right sort. But the horse can wait together with the scalps. Let's to first business."

Leaving my sweetheart to the protection of her pistol and our own proximity we reëntered the tunnel. The sun had passed the noon mark. The change from the glare to the cool dimness was grateful.

We found the candle extinguished and cold among the fragments of the skull; I thankfully stowed the handkerchief away, smutted though it was; no dirt could soil it for me. With the candle again lighting us we proceeded and brought up at the barrier cave-in. Here my partner searched impatient, holding the flame to every suspicious nook and cranny.

"One measly sack? No, there'll be more, there'll be more," was his refrain. "More back in; or else the vein itself. The source is waiting."

The flame blew toward us. He ejaculated, and poked with his ramrod. The ramrod penetrated deeply; he extricated it; now I distinctly felt a current of air; so had he. He fell to, moiling with fingers, feet, rod and even rifle butt, in attack to breach the defenses. I spelled him, albeit the lust did not seize upon me to such absorbing extent. By this I was but advancing the better day of to-morrow.

The opening enlarged. It was at the wall, above the floor, where the earth and rock had lodged loosely—a fringe, as seemed, of the main mass which was further impeded by a great boulder, wedged cornerwise. We

busied for a considerable time, clawing the earth in toward us, and pushing it out from us to the other side. The candle had guttered low when finally the hole yawned to the floor with space admitting of a man's shoulders. The Long American could postpone no farther.

"I'll chance it," said he, streaming dirty sweat. "I've chanced more for maybe less. That rock hangs solid—eh? But you might sit ready to haul me by the feet at first sign. I don't fancy having to play Atlas instead of Midas; no, nor any double rôle combining the two, with my snout forever in the gold and my back supporting the world above."

He squirmed through; to my relief his moccasins disappeared, drawn after his threshing legs. His voice issued muffled.

"Slip me the candle."

I did; it wavered and flared in the draught, and he promptly removed it aside, plunging me into darkness. He maundered, pattering hither and thither; I was in fidgets when at last out he crawled head first, dragging his interminable inches after him. His face as he upturned it and scrambled to his feet was screwed seamy with grime and delight.

"'Tis there!" he puffed. "Sacks of it. Yon's the treasure vault; part buried, to be sure, but enough free to load two animals and more. Who says I don't dream true?"

"Two animals, and more?" I repeated. "You mean that? But the señorita, then? She can't walk!"

He cried out irritably.

"The girl! Oh, yea, verily, of course. That's the rub. You can pack her pick-a-back."

"And so I would, sooner than have her walk," I retorted. "And I'll tell you this, for your understanding: The mule is mine, I believe. I've humored you about the gold, I've subserved my interests to yours; but she shall ride the mule, on occasion, and you may have all the gold that can be carried withal by us."

At that, the candle, burned to the fag-end, scorched his thumb and finger, for he dropped it and testily exclaiming wrung his hand. He mollified.

"No," he answered; "I intend you shall go forth heeled with what is more substantial than a pretty wench. We're partners in this, compañero. We must manage to get a mount for her. We can travel faster, so."

In the moment the candle expired with last flicker of grease, on the cave floor. I heard my sweetheart's voice, calling. The summons, boding ill or good, cut our discussion shorter and jostling each other in our blindness we bundled outside.

CHAPTER XXII

WE ARE THROWN ABACK

SHE was up and standing; and at our arrival she pointed eagerly.

"Here's another horse!" She noted our griminess. "You've been gone so long. Did you find anything?"

"Yes, plenty," said I. "More than we can carry out."

"But with another horse —— That is why I called you."

The Indian horse before remarked had wandered nearer, no doubt attracted by my mule; for horses are silly with mules and this fellow, we might readily deduce, was a stallion. He was outlined—a handsome picture—with head high and crest arched, upon a slight knoll below, which brought him into full view from the mine exit. The distance, I should judge, two hundred paces. Our own animals were to be heard, uneasy, snorting in rebellion at their tethers.

The sun was soon to set behind the mountain ramparts. It cast our shadows far, and the shadows of the rocks and trees and shrubs, and shone broadside upon the stallion so that we could descry his trappings and the loosened neck-thong of reata length falling aslant half taut. Our partner exclaimed covetously:

"A thousand-to-one shot! But a chance, if a thin chance. He's caught fast—ain't he? Yep! How fast, can't tell, though. He'll not stand for us to put salt on his tail; not his kind. We haven't time to run him down, and couldn't anyhow. And if we let him hang 'round he's like to toll our critters off during the night. What say, compañero? There's fortune come half-way again; and fortune with a forelock. Did you ever crease a horse?"

"I never did, any more than I know the word," said I.

He laughed.

"I have, and I haven't. It puts a premium on hair-fine calculating and steadiest of arms. The ball must be planted just at upper edge of nape of neck, barely to graze the spine there, forward of the withers. If done, then well done and he drops stone still without injury save flesh wound and brief shock; inch high, and you miss; quarter inch low, and you kill. Odds are five hundred on either, and a thousand against the one. But it's been done, for I've done it myself."

The señorita turned on me, her hands clasped.

"No! You mustn't. Nor you," she said, to him. "You might kill; the shot might be heard, like that shot at the deer. Let him go free. We shall manage. I only thought you might catch him unharmed."

"He is for you," I answered. "So that you shall ride."

"But we have two ——" she faltered.

"Don Juan wishes to pack the two with the gold," I explained. And I added, at the look upon her face:

"Though you shall ride, just the same; I have told him that. My mule is yours."

Now she cried out quickly:

"And you would lose by it!"

My expostulation clamored for utterance, but the Long American's caustic comment interrupted.

"Come, come! While you bicker the horse waits but we mustn't gaze him in the mouth o'er-much. Kill, miss or bag; shall you try luck, or I, compañero, for sake of lady?"

"Do you claim to out-shoot me, Jack?" I queried.

"Not I, by a jugful; especially at standing mark!"

"Then call the shot for me," I bade, cocking hammer. "Where?"

"Through the thickness of flesh only, atop nape of neck, to shock the curve of spine like you'd bark a squirrel. Best kneel, out of sun; the sun on your sight will dazzle it and you cannot swerve a hair's breadth from exact limits."

Thereupon I stepped back and knelt in shadow of the tunnel portal. My sweetheart crouched beside me, intent.

"Can you do it?" she whispered. "It will be a wonderful shot—I think you will do it, and I shall be glad; but miss him rather than kill him. He is so beautiful."

"I shall neither miss nor kill," said I. "He is for you." And suddenly, as I leveled barrel and sought with the sight, I had that mysterious confidence which sometimes comes over a marksman whose piece may be relied upon.

"Through upper thick part of neck," my mentor cautioned. "Below fall of mane from crest, forward of the withers. Hold coarse but guess fine ——"

The stallion was as motionless as if carved. The sight rested, a trifle high in the rear notch to allow for distance and court miss rather than mortal wound. I set trigger with faint click, and, my breath bottled, my finger crept on to the release. Only a touch—to instant explosion the coaxed stock recoiled against my cuddling cheek, the whiff of smoke cut my view.

The Long American shouted in a cheer—he was running with strides gigantic—my sweetheart had risen elatedly—the stallion was down, flat, quivering; and then as I also rose, hoping but scarce certain, my eyes clouded by the late strain, there was a rattling crash and reverberance behind us. As if it had been given final impetus the tunnel roof had caved in; and from mouth far back the earth and rocks were still sliding to fill the consequent depression.

The roof had been perilously on the verge, to be set off by so small a thing as that quick concussion. I found myself staring into the eyes aghast of the señorita. Emotion chased emotion across her white face.

"Oh!" first she cried. "You were not inside. God be thanked for that!"

"God, and you," I stammered.

Then ——

"But the gold! You can't get it. Was there much, Ricardo?"

"He said there was, in an inner chamber. I saw

only the one sack. No matter. You, he, I—we all might have been inside ——!" .

"But it does matter," she quavered. "I seem to bring you only bad luck. First the savages, then the horse that failed me, then this other horse at which you were tempted to fire—the roof might have stayed in place until—no, no! It might have fallen on you. I am glad. And I have tried hard, Ricardo; you know that I have tried?"

I drew her to me, for she was shuddering, partly with distress, partly with thankfulness, and partly, I could see, with sheer fatigue of mind and body.

"You and your brave spirit are luck enough for me or better man, dear heart," I reassured. More I would have said; I might have kissed her—the prompting was so natural; but she held me off, her eyes beseeching.

"No, please. For a Spanish girl that is not till after marriage."

"But I shall marry you, dearest," I laughed.

"You cannot."

"I can and shall, when once you have told me by your lips ——"

"Oh!" she gasped, with stiffening of body and a ring of terror in her tone. "Look! Quick!"

Out of instinctive modesty she had glanced aside as though to intercept espionage by even the Long American our friend; and I confess that I had forgotten him and the horse also. Now apprized by her tense appeal and by other, wilder sound I looked, and I saw that which fetched me up all standing, so to speak, oblivious, in this startled juncture, of her herself.

The Long American, almost to the horse, was lurchingly drunkenly, his hat gone, his rifle widely flourished; then as down he pitched another screeching treble gave applause and from the shelter of the very knoll upon which the stallion lay there began to hitch, writhe by writhe, a tawny body—Indian. The stallion's neck thong trailed curiously after.

I did not understand the business, yet; but an Apache had been in ambush down there near the stallion, we had taken the bait and Jack had been met by an arrow; and the fellow was bent upon completing his vengeful work with the knife. My thoughts and rifle sprang forward together, and I shouted, the hammer snapped upon spent cap—I had not reloaded! Was there time? The ramrod stuck in the pips, I tugged frenziedly; then, advanced only a few steps, I felt an object pressed against my wrist, I heard her utterance: "The pistol! Take it! Run, run!" and with empty rifle in one hand and loaded pistol in the other run I did, still shouting. She was left defenseless. That occurred to me. And if other savages, wounded or no, were skulking at hand, for opportunity, then God protect and I must not fail of return. But she had bade to duty, in which I must not fail, either.

The distance down hill should have been covered by me very quickly, although my feet felt leaden and my best leaps were haste fettered. The Long American lay struggling fitfully, the stiff and prone stallion was agitated, and between the two the Apache hitched onward, quadrupedal but dragging useless leg, his knife in his teeth, his bow planted before, hand over

hand. And I perceived that he had been hip-shot, and that the reata was following him.

He had not far to go; he might indeed have beaten me with the knife—in fact, he was right upon his prey, but as I charged hallooing he paused, he half raised, lizard like, drew bow. I saw the arrow dart for me and I dodged aside just in time. With speed incredibly vicious it arrived and passed humming.

I lifted pistol, and yet dared not risk wasting the one load of the clumsy flintlock. So I still ran in, fully exposed, to occupy him; and by taking shortest route I hoped to come into close quarters before he might draw bow again. But to notch arrow was with him the matter of only a second. The shaft seemed pointed straight at my chest, with the fiercely screwed eyes above it cleaving passage before. At that, although I was warned and watchful and undeterred, the whang of bowstring and the simultaneous severe shock took me my surprise—my rifle dropped from my left hand, the whole arm thrilled to the shoulder as by a current from a galvanic jar.

A third shaft was poised; it should not be endured; scarcely halting, I shoved the flintlock pistol farther forward and from ten paces fired at the low, grimacing warrior.

He yelled, he spat knife, he lunged with it, he collapsed, his arm and head fell across the Long American's thighs, he settled more limply, and there he lay, his bare upturned back quivering. Now defenseless myself, save in own knife, I sprang again; but the Indian was dead, and as if annoyed by my shot and

voice and the weight upon him, the Long American sat up, hand to bloody crown.

"Bad hurt?" I panted.

"Hey? What?" He blinked about; saw all—with sudden energy wriggled the burden from him or himself from under. "No, no! Creased me with arrow, he did. Wagh! Jingo! That was close shave. I sensed, but I couldn't keep my pins. Stretched him cold, did you? Thank 'ee and thanks again. But get the horse; get the horse while you can. Grab rope and I'll take hair. I will, by thunder!"

The reminder as to the horse was timely, for the stallion was threshing, and the neck rope (attached, I saw, to the dead Indian's waist) already stirred the body. As the animal reared forequarters, convulsive to gain his feet, I grasped the rope; at my haul and voice he stood trembling, crest crimson from the flesh wound, eyes dilated, legs braced, but spirit obedient to the master, man.

Now I might look toward the mine. My sweetheart was in sight, unmolested; she waved, I waved—I was all impatience to get back to her but needs must wait upon the Long American. I witnessed him kneel between the savage's naked shoulders, seize scalp hair with his teeth and actually thus tugging the skin looser, slash with his knife. He jerked, he tore, he pried with blade and fingers and off came the scalp, to dangle gory and doggish from his teeth as he raised his head. So scant the removal of culture from barbarism, of the human from the brute.

He whipped it in his hand a few flings, to drain the

blood from it; wiped his blade upon the remaining locks, and grinned at me.

"Faugh! But teeth match grease better than fingers do. Want it?"

"No!" said I.

"Nor I. Nor she." He flipped it away. "Well, you got your horse, I got my bit of hair as brag; nigh lost my own, too; what? Gosh!" He shook sore head, whereon the blood was drying in an arrow gash. "A smart Injun trick, that. Horse wanders close to downed buck, downed buck grabs hold of neck rope, horse decoys us in, arrow sears me proper and knife is following when you pitch lucky piece of lead from that blunderbuss. Did she send you? Good girl! I woke just in time to see the end."

"Yes," said I; "she sent me. And I came just in time—I fired just in time." Here I looked at my left arm; it was unstained; the arrow (I later observed) had scored rifle breech and stock and passing deflected had only sharply thwacked my crazy-bone with the shaft. "Can you walk? Can you ride? We must go. Hurry!"

"You're right. There may be other snakes. This one—he staked his all upon either being dragged out at end of rope like a sack or upon sinking arrow in one of us. Now if you'll hold fast"—he cut the rope—"I'll mount me aboard—then you hand me hat and gun —whoa-ah, whoa-ah—by the great horn spoon, you shot center again ——" and maundering he painfully climbed upon the stallion's cringing back while I continued to watch the vicinity of the señorita.

We made off, I picking up my own rifle on the way; and not a very pleasing spectacle we ascended to the mine. My sweetheart hied down a short way to meet us.

"Is Don Juan hurt badly?"

"A mere crack on his head ten inches wide of his brains," he laughed. "His brains can be reached only through his mouth."

"And you, Ricardo?" She scanned me anxiously.

"Not a scratch." I gathered her with my free arm; she briefly leaned against me, and we all proceeded on while the Long American broached his bubbling fancies.

"Hoity toity! 'Tis thus the fair rewards the brave, eh? Eheu! What says Pope's Odyssey?

"'So ends the bloody business of the day.'

Yes. Muy bueno. And it might have ended worse; would have, too. Well, my children, receive an old man's blessing. And make best use of time. For what says Pope himself?

"'See how the world its veterans rewards!
A youth of frolics, an old age of cards.'

You, my son, have proved true compañero and muy hombre deserving of your luck, and you, señorita, are now outfitted with a man of good American guts who need not invite you to share only bread and cheese. God grant you many days. I promise you silver mug, at the first christening; or would you prefer a gold pin

for the small-clothes? Hi hi!" he chuckled broadly. "I'll be godfather yet, which is better than bestowing my name nowhere."

To the tune of such eulogies (not lacking an embarrassment of felicitations premature) we wended up—I measurably content with myself, at last, for I could not but admit that in running down upon that Apache bow and with every nearer step feeling arrow point in chest or stomach I had declined no jeopardy of person nor fortune. And now I did appear to have acquitted creditably, in her eyes and in his. So we wended up, I say, in course of his bantering prattle, until as we entered the slight hollow his roving eyes chanced upon the cave-in and the closed tunnel mouth.

He exclaimed. The transformation of his cheerful countenance was ludicrous. His wrinkles, as softened by the spring of a February thaw, were frozen solid by the grip of winter again.

"What's that? Everything gone under? Thunder and Mars! How? When?"

"'Twas already loosened," said I. "We were out none too soon, and thanks to the señorita. My rifle shot did the final business."

He clapped indignant hand upon leathern thigh, and while he still gawked swore roundly, exhaling bitter dudgeon.

"It's ghosts' gold. If I were only there inside with 'em ——! But they can have it; they can eat it and bed on it. This basin's accurst. We've done all that two men can do, and to-morrow we'll ride for the Arkansaw, against losing wits and animals as well." He

flung off in a pet. "Here's your horse, and little the worse for the ball. A salve of tobacco on the wound will heal it pronto."

"Your head, Don Juan," my sweetheart prompted. "I will dress your head."

"At your service with it, then," he yielded. "Patch it with a sop, and I thank you." He groaned dismally. "Eheu, eheu! Pope knew, he did. 'A youth of frolics, an old age of cards,' eh? I'll have to stake beaver skins, as usual."

"My handkerchief?" she asked, of me, and blushing to the words.

I surrendered the handkerchief, and he gave her his own large cotton affair, for bandage. Rather envying him her ministrations I left, to lead the stallion aside. The ball had drilled a clean hole through the flesh; the animal shivered to my touch, but having been tied securely submitted to the best first-hand treatment that I was enabled to render.

She joined me where I was busied.

"To-morrow morning, Don Juan said?"

"Yes," I replied. "I would it were to-night, but we'd gain little. To-morrow early we'll ride away at last. You'll be glad?"

"To the Arkansaw?"

"That seems safer, dear heart."

"Safer indeed," she responded. "Yes, Ricardo mío, I am glad. This place surely is accurst, but I did not know. You don't blame me for having brought you here?"

"Blame you!" said I. "You should blame me for

having let you come. But everything's turning out all right."

"You bear no ill will toward Antonio—you will not hate him?" she persisted. "You will not think meanly of him? He is Spanish and my cousin, and he was jealous; and you are American. But he is not bad at heart and he is no coward. I am certain he rode for rescue—he will hasten with it."

"I shall not hate your cousin, querida," I answered. "But tell me: Would he have sent rescue to the Apaches, for Don Juan and me?"

"Of himself, I do not know," she said, troubled. "I should have made him, though. Yes, I should have made him, if I might."

"But you stayed. Why?"

"Because—I was afraid, Ricardo. I was afraid to leave. Once back in Santa Fé, how could I tell? My father is feeble, he may be dead. And Antonio wishes to marry me. I didn't hear all that he and the chief said. But the Spanish captive said that the bargain did not include the Americans. I could not leave you; she bid me stay and hope. I saw she was our friend. Still, you must not hate Antonio. He planned for me, first, and I do believe he would have followed my safety with yours."

"After his own," I reflected; and did not voice the same, nor press her farther. She had her family honor to maintain. And what matter now? Thank heaven we were free to go together.

CHAPTER XXIII

O SEÑORITA ROSA!

THE Long American (his face quaintly singular by reason of blue print handkerchief bandage knotted under his chin like the ribbons of a poke bonnet) was prowling disconsolate, at which I twinged with only due sympathy, for he moved old and dejected.

"None but the dead to plague us now," he announced. "I've taken stock."

The arena was darkening by the time that we had eaten supper, had prepared our same beds of two nights before, had again attended to our animals, and were laid down for rest against a daybreak start. Dead tired, outstretched at the threshold of sorely needed sleep, I looked back upon our travails hereabouts as finished, and forward upon another and more agreeable stint as already begun. And then sleep overcame me, foot, hand and senses—a dreamless session vaguely beset by my good partner's erratic growls. But mainly we all slumbered as if dead, I felt; so that when I wakened I had to orient myself afresh.

I chanced first to see him, in the rosy gray, where he lay upon his back, gurgling, his grizzled handkerchief-bound visage upturned, his mouth open as far as possible: a comforting although not attractive sight. But

when I stiffly shifted and sought for my sweetheart's form, it was gone; her place was empty again.

This time I delayed with no conjectures; I knew. She had fled me, she had repeated her attempt, she was upon her way to Santa Fé and her father—to Antonio—to Antonio—no! That I would not believe; nevertheless the accusation bit me even while I thrust it down.

In a whirl of chagrin as much as of fear and disappointment I leaped upright, and called, and listened, and recalled. The Long American aroused to my brayings and stopped me as I broke into a run.

"Cosa—what?"

"She is gone again!"

He blinked.

"The girl? No!"

"Yes!"

He threw off his cover.

"Have you searched?"

"Not yet. I will."

I ran to the animals, somewhat below.

"She took the stallion," I shouted. "Good-bye."

"Wait!" he bade, active. "Let's pack blankets and such. We may need 'em. It's like to be a wild-goose chase, but I'm with you. Two'll be better than one."

We worked fast, to his mutterings.

"Gone, eh? That's woman, and that's last straw! Aye, and that's the Spanish of it. No Arkansaw and company of heretics for her, after all. You won't think better and strike as planned?" he queried.

"You won't take warning and try luck elsewhere, or later?"

"I'll follow her," said I. "But I don't ask you to."

"All right, then," said he. "I go along. I don't forget last evening's doings—I owe you my skin, she backed you up in that; you've stood by me, she stood by us both. I think you bewitched, I think her bewitched in this juncture; she's gone for home and people, doubtless hopes to meet up with the Antonio party on way, for this you creased the horse and for this I nigh went under, and you, too; but let's be off. We may overhaul her. And then what?"

I could not say. The future seemed bleak, shot through with only glimmerings of her. We mounted, we loped for the little gate and made exit.

"Keep cool and give me the trail," ordered he; and in the small canyon here he dashed recklessly by me. We soon marked the tracks of her horse; but by the frosty dew in the hoofprints and upon the broken brush she had passed well before us.

The canyon still slumbered, except for the birds. It couched misty and chill and lone. The Long American picked rapid way, following the tracks with the sureness of a hound, his eyes darting from side to side the while.

The trail was crooked, evidence that the stallion had rebelled against an excursion illy advised, to him, and blindly undertaken. The bushes and rocks had impeded. I could easily imagine her tender limbs whipped and her body jolted to the slipping and the stumbling as she clung. If I only might have been

with her! Why should she have denied me that privilege, at least?

We arrived at the red-lipped mouth and turned out. She had pursued homeward way; now how far, before she would be riding into them—those others, or circumventing them would gain the open and the road to Santa Fé?

"She's still a-going," he called back. "But watch sharp. We can do our possible; not more. And there may be deviltry ahead."

I chafed at his caution as he slackened to listen and to scout around the main-canyon shoulders. The sun topped the rim and began to pour his beams in, lighting the rocks and trees and shrubs. We were getting down. The prevailing quietude and peace pierced me with despair; my every fibre strained for action, but naught was granted to us save this sensation of almost hopeless quest into the face of advancing peril.

The Long American reined abruptly and held up his arm.

"Sht! There's something."

"What?"

"Some critter. By the powers, it's her horse!"

Hope flamed, but fear wrestled it and tortured it. What now? Where was she—my girl? I sighted the stallion, as we rode forward step by step, peering and harkening. The stallion, unbacked, was painfully grazing at the length of the neck rope entangled in brush. He stared at our approach but directed to no whereabouts of her. We arrived, searching right and left. We pushed farther, we were unrewarded and

unmolested, the silence was brooding and ominous as if ambush waited upon us. My taut nerves sensed tragedy at every yard. By the sign of crushed growth and disturbed rocks the stallion had back-tracked some little distance. The Long American uttered hasty cry, sprang ahead and was off his horse.

"Here she is!" And when I galloped across and in, there she was, struggling to sit up, for the moment poignantly dazed, then relaxed at presence of me.

"You?" she uttered. "Oh, I had told you not to!"

"That didn't matter. Nothing matters, save you," I babbled. I was down beside her, her hand in mine. "Are you hurt? Can you stand? Oh, querida mia, we've found you. Why did you do this; why alone? You didn't have to. Where you go, I go."

She sat erect and withdrew her hand.

"No. I'm going on. I must, to my father. Please let me go."

"But are you hurt?" the Long American demanded.

"I've been asleep, is all. I don't remember—I think I was tired—I thought I had come further. Then I slipped off. But I'm rested. Where is my horse? Oh, I see. It was for me, wasn't it? If you will bring it, then good-bye, friends. And mil gracias. You shall ride for the Arkansaw while you may."

"No!" I declared. "Not I without you. He may go. If ——"

"Hark!" The Long American craned, head poised alert. "I hear hoofs. They're coming; don't know who, but if it's that Antonio party we'll not be their meat less a little salt. Hey?"

The roll of stones and the clatter of hoofs sounded from down the canyon. Our animals pricked ears. The eyes of the señorita widened upon my face; she shrank, and cast frightened glance around, seeking refuge.

"Not here! Not now—with you!" she prayed. "Go, go! I will wait."

"They'll have to wait a bit, themselves," grunted the Long American. He bestirred us with masterful commands. "Tie our critters. Now you, Miss Señorita Rosa, do us the favor of sitting quiet to rear and keeping your pretty mouth closed. You, compañero, behind that handy chunk o' rock on this side, and I câched in the brush opposite. I'd best câche this other plunder also." And he stuffed the shirt-map at random into the meshes of a sprawled cedar.

We were none too expeditious, for scarcely had we ensconced ourselves when the thud and rattle of hoofs, the creak of saddle leather and the jingle of spur and bridle swelled nearer upon us—and then around the turn immediately before there swept the cavalcade. At short hail and the threat of the rifle muzzles their advance blunted. They jammed. Clatter and jingle ceased. It was a surprise.

They numbered a score. I saw Don Antonio in the fore with Captain Stanley of the caravan; I saw old José, and a priest. The rest were caballeros unknown to me, but the make-up did not augur so ill as might have been expected.

Captain Stanley severed the silence, riding on a few paces, Don Antonio at his horse's haunch.

"Qué tiene? What are you pointing gun at me for? Are you crazy, to set out girl-stealing and risk having all New Mexico blood-hounding on your trail?"

"We'll take care of our trail, Cap," the Long American coolly responded. "And I ask you to keep your distance—so. As for girl-stealing, that remains to be proven. If you have more to say, be easy with it; then back to your compañeros. For if you make me touch trigger we'll both be sorry."

"Dios! There she is, herself!" squalled Antonio, with finger leveled. "As I said. Santa María, who would have believed it?"

I could have killed him. My blood surged so that the rifle sight dimmed.

"Well, the fact is, you've got the girl whether you stole her or not," quoth Captain Stanley. "And inasmuch as yon young blade has defied bell, book and candle besides the family, you'll have to give her up. The matter can't possibly go further. She's already betrothed to a caballero of her own kind, and you've nigh ruined her, as it is. I'll stand by you, one American to another, against the civil authorities, but I'm hanged if I want a ruction with the church here."

I heard a little rustle behind me, and felt the presence of my sweetheart. There she was, crouched close to me, so that her breath came and went with mine, and her slender hand clutched a fold of my sleeve.

The priest, fat, and irked by the saddle, advanced upon his mule.

"You have sinned, my daughter," he called.

"Home with you before you are lost forever. The church will take you in, and your punishment shall be in the hands of the Holy Mother. Leave those heretics, and come."

"Señorita! Oh, mi señorita!" It was old José, to the front, his wrinkled face streaming. "Ay de mí! El señor mayor es muerto—the old man is dead. Su señor padre is gazing, with the saints. Come back. I am still your servant. Come back to the home and old José."

"What!" rapped the Long American. "Don Isidro dead? Already?"

"He died yesterday at sunrise. He was yet warm when found by José."

My sweetheart drew quick breath of pain.

"It makes no difference," Antonio proclaimed. "I am to marry her, of course. I am a caballero of honor, and as her segundo I am now her guardian. She shall not lack; and I shall marry her when she has been home long enough for this scandal to quiet."

She rose and stood, slim and straight, careless of her Indian garb. And indeed what with our bandaged friend, and the bandaged stallion, and my own disarray, we formed an ensemble more than extraordinary.

"No, Antonio; I cannot marry you," she said clearly. "But I have committed no sin, father. I came of my own free will, and these señores did not know it was I. My sin would be in marrying Don Antonio, whom I do not love. Now that I have no home to go to, you may take me—and I will confess what I have to confess, but I can confess to no sin. And these señores must

not be seized. They are innocent of wrong doing. That I swear. Now I am ready."

I sprang before her.

"She shall not enter Santa Fé in disgrace," I protested. "She shall enter it only protected by my name —and to that end I defy all Mexico. Will you marry us, father?"

Her hand sought mine; and there we stood, braving them. Don Antonio laughed loudly and uttered a cheap aside for all to hear. I itched to drag him down, but the priest spoke.

"It is as I feared, then."

"You need have no fears, father. We are innocent —I not more than she."

"For her to be married to you is impossible; it is banned by the church. Otherwise—perhaps well. It would be a solution, although you are an American and a foreigner." I thought that his heavy face unbent. "You love her, my son?"

"She to me is as a saint," I answered. "There never has been another woman, except my mother."

"And you love him, my daughter?"

Her fingers closed upon mine. She replied with words that I had longed to hear.

"I love him, father. Indeed I love him and I am not ashamed. He shall be my señor, or none."

"You are of the church, my daughter." The priest reproved firmly, setting aside all sentiment. "I cannot marry you with a heretic. That is final. You have a passing fancy, but you know better. Forget this love for a heretic and think only upon the Holy

Mother who has brought you back into the bosom of the true faith."

"But I, too, father, am of the faith," said I.

She faced me. She was glorified.

"You? You, bien querido mío? Corazón de mi corazón—heart of my heart! You have said it? And you never said it before!"

"I made no plea on that score," I defended, in English. "Why should I? I would have won you, not as a Catholic but as a man. But even were I a Protestant I should have become a Catholic, to marry you if by your love."

"And I believe that I should have become a heretic, to marry you," she softly answered in Spanish.

"Be still," the priest thundered. "Be still, woman, ere you sin farther. Words like those are not light upon the lips of one who has just escaped from mortal peril. You say you are of the true faith, Señor Americano? Is that possible? Guard well lest you lie."

"It is possible, father," I assured. "There are, as you know, many Catholics in the United States of North America—yes, there are many in my own city; there were some in the very caravan."

"True word," nodded Captain Stanley. "You may believe him."

"You shall confess me later, father," I pleaded. "But you have a duty to perform here first."

"Confessed you both shall be," he returned. "Now a few questions." And he asked of me my parish, my parenthood, my business. He hesitated, while we

twain stood side by side, fronting them, friend or foe, and I grasped my rifle. There was that, at least.

"He lies," Don Antonio accused. "I am to marry her myself. That was the wish. All Americans are heretics."

"That surely is a lie, Antonio," she rebuked. "For you well know that I was in a convent of our Holy Mother in St. Louis."

"A French convent, not an American," he retorted.

The padre had been gazing steadily but not unkindly upon us. He spoke again.

"I will join you two here in the first bonds. That will protect her name, but it will be a union only in form, and for it I shall have to get indulgence later. The true marriage must be pronounced in the parish and within the folds of the church; and first you shall cleanse yourselves by confession and penance. And if I find that you have lied, young señor, think not that you have tricked me to good purpose. There are those in Mexico who will not overlook an insult to their religion and their laws." He eyed me as if to read my very soul. I answered him frankly.

"I have not lied, my father."

"Then I will unite you, as preliminary measure, here and now."

"Por Dios, father!" Don Antonio ruefully laughed. "That being the case I will stand by her. I am her segundo and I shall represent the family."

"And by the eternal, as he is my compañero and I am both father and brother to him, I shall back him to the end of the venture," delivered the Long American

—the first words to be wrung from his goggling amazement at the turn in events. "Yes, and kiss the bride, too, if he'll remember thirty of my years and she'll be pleased to forget them."

A sudden change had come over the company. Now following the lead of Don Antonio they were jovial, well spoken, and complacent. Even José bared his gums and mouthed his pleasure, essaying to divulge that he had had a fondness for me, after all.

So here we were joined together in ceremony brief, until the rites should be solemnized duly and under proper auspices. Amidst the congratulations, heartfelt or not, Captain Stanley sought me out.

"You will live in Santa Fé?"

"That I do not know."

"There is a second matter," he said. "The matter of a mine. You have the papers?"

"The mine!" scoffed Don Antonio, catching at the English word. "Dios, the mine! Keep it, amigo mío. You have been in, you have come out; it is yours."

"What of it, Captain?" I challenged.

"Another mad feat. Don't you know of the decree?"

"What decree?"

"The recent one, that no foreigner shall mine within the province of New Mexico? Now, shall you turn Mexican?"

"Never, Captain. I am an American."

He addressed my wife, for that she henceforth should be considered.

"And you, señora?" he quizzed. "You will be ——?"

"I," she replied proudly, "am what my señor is."

The Long American had approached again; he extended to us the shirt map.

"Your wedding present, I reckon," he grinned, with mumpsical chops.

She took it, gazed inquiringly upon me, and with sudden strength tore it across, and tore it smaller, and the enclosed grant also, for they were brittle with age. She tossed the fragments to the breeze.

"Let us forget," she faltered; and put her arm within mine. "It is evil country. Oh, my heart! We have enough, in each other, and if you should be tempted to seek more ——?"

"There is no more to seek," said I. "We have found."

"Well," our good friend grumbled, scratching turkey neck, "if I could cajole any petticoat into looking at me like that I'd end my trail at a lodge fire myself."

THE END